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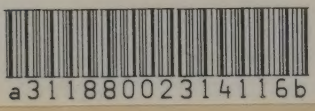

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# ACCIDENT

By

ARNOLD BENNETT

CASSELL & COMPANY LTD.
LONDON, TORONTO, MELBOURNE & SYDNEY

*First Published . . 1929*

*Printed in Great Britain*

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# ACCIDENT

## CHAPTER I

## WORRY

IT was a fine sharp morning, midway between Christmas and the New Year. Alan Frith-Walter drove down to Victoria in a smart, new, orange-coloured taxi. He had in his hand a slim volume, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, at whose opening pages he had been glancing with agreeable anticipation of sustained and lofty pleasure to come. He was a business man of some culture, who, however, rarely meddled with poetry. But of late he had encountered the work of Matthew Arnold, and Arnold's solemn and convincing praise of Wordsworth had directed him to the author of *The Prelude*. He felt at once that he had not been misled. He felt that Wordsworth was his own destined poet. In the first fifty lines were a dozen phrases that flicked his imagination. "Escaped from the vast city" where he "long had pined." "The earth lies all before me." "Dear Liberty." True, he had a rendezvous with his wife at a certain hour on a certain day in a certain con-

tinental resort. Nevertheless, somehow, the earth seemed all before him, and he experienced the glorious sensation of freedom. The keen, slight breeze through the half-open window of the cab was indeed "the sweet breath of heaven" blowing on his body, and within him was "the correspondent breeze that gently moved with quickening virtue." And he was aware also of "a cheerful confidence in things to come."

A man with many responsibilities, he was accustomed to carry a weight on his mind; the state of mental disquiet was almost continuous with him. Worry, philosophically borne, had grown into a secret habit with him. And now he made the discovery that he was not worrying! At the moment he had nothing to worry about. Startling! Wonderful! Incredible! Morbidly he rummaged in his head for things that ought to trouble him; but he could find not one! He was uplifted.

"This," he thought, "is happiness. Work behind. Pleasure in front."

The taxi stopped in the courtyard of the station. He lowered the window and looked out for his secretary, Miss Office, who ought to have been waiting for him on the pavement. But Miss Office was not there. His gaze searched the pavement in both directions, examining the groups of travellers busy and preoccupied against the row of cabs and motor-cars from which they had emerged. Not a sign of Miss Office. Yet she had left the house with the luggage half an hour

earlier than himself. Instantly he was worried again. She might have been in an accident. She might be injured. The luggage might be spread abroad on some roadway, and Miss Office being driven unconscious to a hospital. Frightful complications. He would miss the train. In which case he would miss the boat. In which case he would miss the continental train. In which case he would miss the rendezvous with his wife, —he who was never late and never failed to keep an appointment. He had nothing with him, not even his ticket. The services of the priceless Miss Office were always comprehensive and complete.

A deferential porter opened the door of the taxi. Remarkable how there was always a porter, no matter what the stress of traffic, eager to attend on a well-dressed single man!

"No, nothing. Nothing at all, thanks," said Alan with a kindly smile, hiding as usual his anxieties.

"Thank ye, sir," said the porter, very pleasantly.

No trace of disappointment or resentment in the porter's manner. He obligingly held the door for Alan to descend, and Alan nodded appreciatively and turned to the driver. And, just as he seemed to be conferring a favour on the porter, so he seemed to be conferring a favour on the driver—by the mere contact with them. The driver was an old man—rare to see an old driver with a new taxi: the old had generally to be content with antique, feeble, grinding vehicles—fat, and fattened

still more by jerseys and coats against the frost. His red, ruined face and white hair rose out of a thick muffler.

"What's it worth?" Alan asked brightly, in the lingo of the driver's class.

The old man, short-sighted, peered at the dial.

"Two bob, sir," was the husky answer, which mingled respect with dignity.

Alan bestowed half-a-crown.

"Thank ye, sir." A hoarse cough.

As the driver raised a little the whole of his right side in order to get at his trouser-pocket, the two human beings looked at one another with mutual understanding. The driver had the air of saying: "I've seen a lot of life and I know my world, and I know you're a gentleman and friendly. That's all right." And Alan's glance seemed to be saying: "You're all right, and you do know your world, and I'm all right."

Up went the little red flag. Off curved the taxi. The brief meeting was naught; it was banality itself; yet it had given a human satisfaction to both men, had confirmed in both of them their belief in the decency and commonsense of mankind. Alan thought longer of the cabman than the cabman thought of Alan. The cabman, Alan reflected, was old and bronchitic, and fated to spend his last years in affronting the sunless inclemency of the London climate; and for far less money a week than Alan would squander on a fancy dressing-gown. Whereas Alan, in excel-

lent health, was away for a Continental resort. Something wrong somewhere; something wrong! No! What a trite, futile and specious comparison! Alan's admirable brain laughed at it tolerantly. Still, the absurd comparison added itself to his worry. He would miss the train, and society was sick. Yes, he was worried, and he could not deny it, and he welcomed worry, as one always welcomes the resumed sway of an old habit that has been overthrown for a space. Wordsworth was only dope. . . .

And there, in the luggage-hall, at the window for excess luggage, talking rather excitedly to an unseen man caged within, pushed at by a queue of persons who were impatiently wondering whether she meant to stay at the damned window all day, stood Miss Office. Part of Alan's worry fell from him. But society was still sick, and he was an ass. He must take himself in hand. Wordsworth was not dope. The world was before him. The Pullmans were at the platform, and seventy miles off the steamer was straining at the quay. He tried to recall the Wordsworthian mood.

## CHAPTER II

## MISS OFFICE

MISS OFFICE came away from the window victorious as from a battle. She was a woman of between thirty and thirty-five, with a kindly, capable, and helpful expression. Not beautiful, not pretty, she nevertheless looked attractive; her skin was smooth, her complexion agreeable; and she was smartly dressed as an honest secretary ought to be. The discerning would be inclined to say, after a mere sight of her: "I could trust that woman." Alan thought quite simply: "If anything happened to her, my life would be hell." He could never understand how it was that no man had captured her. Of her private life he knew little, except that she shared a flat with a woman-friend. She seemed wiser and more charitable than a virgin, but he was convinced that she had no commerce with men more intimate than a dance. A creature mysterious and divine whom he had bought for six pounds a week and a very sympathetic demeanour!

The bustling hall was crowded with travellers, porters, and loaded trucks. A continuous stream of travellers and their belongings and attendants entered from the courtyard; and one by one, slowly,

the trucks moved forth into the freedom of the platform, each watched over by its group of nervous, suspicious, impatient luggage-owners. Miss Office found her porter, and presented a document for the inspection of an official who pasted on to Alan's enormous wardrobe-trunk a label bearing the name of a distant and romantic place. All men moved. The official alone in the universe was fixed and stable. A strange thought, that the humble and yet influential fellow passed his working life in thus franking other people's precious possessions for transit to wondrous foreign cities which he never would see, and of which his imaginative conception, if he had one, must be wildly distorted!

Miss Office gave him sixpence for a single sweep of his brush. He took the coin as a right, and Miss Office was for him as though she had never been. The luggage, released, slid as it were furtively from before his face. The next moment, out on the platform, the wardrobe-trunk was rapt away from the rest of the luggage into the careless, implacable custody of railway companies and steamship owners, and the sole evidence of Alan's title to it was a flimsy bit of paper in Miss Office's hand. Alan's suitcase and strapped rugs were to go into the Pullman. Miss Office would not confide her own two suitcases to any system of registration; for Miss Office seeing was possessing.

At the barrier which protected the unauthorised from that part of the platform reserved for the departing, Miss Office came smiling up to Alan, her

hands still holding papers, paper-cases, and silver change.

"Everything in order?"

"Yes, Mr. Frith-Walter."

She was as tranquil and cheerful and grateful as though Alan had just fought a campaign on her behalf instead of vice-versa. She gave him his title to the trunk, his passport, his sleeping-car ticket, and the journey-ticket, which last resembled the libretto of a French comic opera with translation for the benefit of foreigners.

"We're in the first train," said she. "Car P. I. —Seat 16. I'll see that your things are put in."

She left him rather ashamed of his assumed helplessness and incompetence. He could have fended quite well for himself. What was civilisation coming to? Well, it was all a convention. Had he not trained the girl to treat him as an incapable? Doubtless Louis XIV could have put his shirt on without the assistance of two nobles.

He passed through the barrier, carried forward on a spate of luxurious travellers who, with twenty minutes to spare and their train-seats strictly reserved, yet jostled and pushed one another as though, now, they were escaping from a building on fire.

He stationed himself at the steps of one entrance to car P. I. and saw Miss Office and the porter at the steps of the other entrance, and the empty luggage-truck near by. The sacred enclosure within the barrier was a confusion of somewhat dis-

tracted travellers rushing after porters, or beckoning porters to rush after themselves, peering at the numbers of cars, climbing up into cars or jumping down from cars, buying papers, questioning officials, arguing, conversing anxiously, settling hats on heads and cravats on necks, powdering faces, examining tickets, counting money, taking exercise to and fro for the hygienic sake of exercise, stamping their feet. The only nonchalant and unworried persons were the porters, who never travelled, and the car-attendants, who also never travelled because they were eternally at home in their cars, and a minister of the Crown who posed with complacent resignation for the eager cameras of two newspaper photographers.

A slatternly greaser bearing a grease-tin passed close by Alan, absorbed in his business and humble. For Alan he became a symbolic figure representing all the humble who would be left behind when the trains with their thousand tons of luxury rolled off towards the south: the taxi-drivers, the porters, the minor-officials, the newsboys, etc., etc.

"Why are we going, and why are they helping us to go?" thought Alan. "And why do they not storm the trains and take our places by force? All have their cares, and I have not a care in the world. These contrasts on the platform at Victoria are really too spectacular. . . . How crudely I am thinking! Still, I have not a care in the world. But the world is my care." He fingered

the volume of Wordsworth in the pocket of his new blue overcoat.

"Your seat *is* facing the engine." Miss Office was standing right by him, in the entrance to the car. "I've put the rugs on the rack and your suit-case is here." She pointed behind her.

He nodded.

"You got your seat?"

"Oh yes!" she laughed, actually laughed with pleasure. "There's more room in the ordinary first-class carriages than there is in the Pullmans."

She too was bound for the rendezvous, but not accompanying him. She would travel first-class only as far as Folkestone; thence second-class, after the Channel crossing, by a slower train that had no sleeping berths. She would sit up all night—in a corner if she had luck. She was going partly for Alan's convenience, partly because his wife had suggested it (not often that wife and woman-secretary got on as smoothly as those two!), and partly because he had felt that she well deserved a holiday—or the semblance of a holiday. Alan looked at her.

Suddenly, her eye wandering across the scene as she mechanically fingered the silver change still in her hand, she gave one of her nervous starts; beneath her habitual calm slept the potentialities of emotion. She controlled herself instantly. Alan's glance followed hers, curiously. Into a car of the second train a young woman was just disappearing.

"That's rather like Pearl," thought Alan.

Pearl was his daughter-in-law, married to his only son less than a year ago. Pearl was with her husband in the north of England. Therefore she could not be in the boat-train for Folkestone. Moreover there were thousands of other Pearls with just the beautiful blonde face and hair and the figure and the mien of Jack's Pearl.

"I think I'd better be getting in," said Alan.

"Certainly, Mr. Frith-Walter," Miss Office concurred, and leapt down with the light alacrity of a young girl, and scurried away along the platform to her own compartment. Something self-conscious, he fancied, in her comforting voice, some concern in her kindly, sensible face.

## CHAPTER III

# THE PULLMAN

THE train rolled smoothly and grandiosely across the sunlit river and began its perambulation of endless Surrey suburbs. Alan had a solitary armchair near the service door of the Pullman P. I. No sooner had the flight towards the south begun than the orgy began. In the taking and execution of orders for food and drink the attendants were continually opening the service-door, which banged itself to in the close vicinity of Alan's head. They allowed the door to bang, but otherwise their demeanour was shop-finished, like the polished grained woods and the upholstery and the brass and the advertisements of the gaudy car. They inclined respectfully to receive commands, showing no consternation or indignation at being asked to supply fish and fowl and tea and coffee and sweets and whiskey and cocktails and even beer so early in the morning.

What a cargo of opulent beings, of whom it might be said that for them the sensual world did indeed exist! What a cargo of fleshly ideals and aspirings! Thus Alan criticised.

The glib young couple in the far corner lapping

a drink apiece and feverishly smoking cigarettes —the youth slim and elegant, the girl's vapid, pretty, initiated face made up in rose and white and black to the last degree of artificiality! The gross middle-aged couple sunk in dailiness and in a hebetude so deep that they were unconscious even of the boredom inflicted upon them by the everlasting society of their partners! The lone, chic lady, intensely self-conscious and alert for the gaze of interest!

And there was a pair who lived in a state of acute emotion. The plain woman of fifty, not smartly dressed but glinting and jingling with precious jewels, had the assured gestures of a spoilt and discontented beauty at whose feet knelt worshipping crowds. Every time the door banged she struck the defenceless wood with the lightning glance of her resentful eye. The same glance followed homicidally the backs of the innocent attendants. She would have tea and she would not. Orders were countermanded and reinstated. The man gave her a letter to read: she took it as though it stank of polecats and read it with sniffing disdain and dropped it and grunted. And she knitted savagely the while. She was incensed against the whole of God's universe, from some cause which only the man knew. She ruthlessly outraged the social amenities of the car, and poised herself, with intent to alarm, on the very edge of hysteria. The man evidently knew his task. He had to keep her from toppling over.

He grimly held himself in, watching her warily.

As Alan observed the woman's thin, dyed hair at the top of her forehead, and her wild eyes set too closely together, he thought:

"I can understand murder: the poor fellow is bound for the scaffold."

There were some nice, innocuous, seemly people here and there in the car, but they were considerably less vitalised than the spoilt and discontented beauty. Like the rest of the travellers they were fleeing from themselves, and did not know it. Alan opened his Wordsworth, and at once felt self-conscious. He read the lines, he even articulated them, moving his lips silently to his soul. But the words conveyed nothing to his soul. Baffled by the sensual atmosphere of the car, he could not use for his own uplifting the philosophical instrument of *The Prelude*.

His soul would not listen. His mind was out of control. Instead of dwelling calmly and beneficently upon the marvels of the sensations of man amid the divine phenomena of nature, his intractable mind summoned and clung to the image of Pearl. Was she in the following train? If she was not, why had Miss Office given that nervous start? And by what trick of the brain had he imagined that he had seen Pearl? If she indeed was in the following train, why was she there? Why, on her way from the North, where she was staying, or supposed to be staying, with Jack, had

she not called at her father-in-law's house? Or, in default, why had no word been sent to him? He knew little of Pearl, had seen little of her. He had accepted her at Jack's valuation.

What could be wrong? Was a conjugal catastrophe imminent? Absurd! Absurd! He had no grounds whatever for such a distressing supposition. Yet his mind made the supposition. He was miserable, and for absolutely no adequate cause. A little earlier he had been ridiculously supposing a disaster to Miss Office which might have marred his holiday. Had he profited by the lesson? Not a whit. He was merely repeating his foolishness. What kind of a fool was he?

He had been born well, adored by very sensible parents, well educated in a modern manner under the direction of a wise father. He had succeeded to an ample share in a vast manufacturing business. He had married satisfactorily. Nothing in his wife of the spoilt, faded beauty making hell around her by the antics of over-indulged nerves! His son, though differing sharply from him in opinions, was a fine lad with an intellect as keen as God made 'em.

He himself was healthy and personable; young for his age. He had done excellently in the business, which, without positive enthusiasm for it, he liked. And he had interests wider than the business. He bought rare books, and a French picture occasionally. He had preferences among pianists, violinists, and orchestral conductors. He

could go to a new play and despise it and yet enjoy bits of it. He understood food and wines and loved them. He could talk to his wife about her clothes with more knowledge and appreciation than she could talk to him about his. Surely he had wit and humour and kindliness and generosity. Unquestionably he owned masses of money. If ever there was a darling of destiny, he was one.

And what was the grand result? What were his life's greatest satisfactions? Well, he enjoyed having breakfast by himself, and reading his private correspondence and thinking of neat replies to it. Well, he enjoyed wandering about hosiers' shops attended by several deferential, smooth-spoken males and being tempted to buy lovely shirts, handkerchiefs, neckties, socks—and yielding to the temptation. Well, he enjoyed getting into bed of a night, and savouring with all his body the perfection of the bed, and drawing the eiderdown over his shoulder, and realising afresh nightly that the bed-lamp was in precisely the right place above his head, and opening a book that was a masterpiece, and reading it, and feeling drowsy and drowsier, and moving his right hand two inches to switch off the light. . . . And he enjoyed the routine of doing the same things at the same time every day, day after day.

All these matters he enjoyed, and little else. That was the grand result of his career. He thought angrily:

"I have been breathing for fifty years. I have

passed the climacteric. I have been educated; I have educated myself. I have worked, and I am setting out for pleasure which I have earned. And here I am miserable in this priceless contraption of a Pullman. I have learned everything except how to live."

Then the train stopped, surprisingly, in the midst of a wide, Kentish landscape.

## CHAPTER IV

## HALT

SHOCK. The stop was very sudden, and, despite the resilience of Pullman springs, liquids spilled out of glasses and cups; something fell from a rack, and a fork slid off a table on to the thick-carpeted floor. An inspector traversing the car with his hands full of tickets and documents, could only maintain stability by clutching the back of the chair of the spoilt and discontented old beauty.

"Really!" exclaimed the hag, low and savagely, "I wonder they dare stop a train like this like that!"

The whole railway system was thereby indicted. Her husband with histrionic sangfroid restored to the inspector a yellow paper that had escaped from him. All vibration and shaking ceased; glass no longer tintinnabulated against glass. The silence and the stillness were intense. The passengers realised by force of contrast the fantastic din and racket and oscillation in which they had been travelling. A formidable peace! The passengers instinctively began a competition as to who should display the most natural and unconcerned demeanour; for they were all British; not a mercurial

New Yorker among them. Even the hag-beauty kept still while considering what future antics would best irritate her husband and keep the attention of an annoyed car on her arrogant self.

Five hours elapsed, which the Pullman clock naughtily measured as five minutes. Then time ceased and eternity set in. A few remarks here and there in an undertone. Encouraged by these, the young couple resumed their giggling duologue, but in whispers, for now everybody listened to everybody else. And in the horrid stillness the deadly work of the fraying of nerves was proceeding. The youth rang a bell, having been requested to order a further supply of drinks. The bell was faintly heard in the car. No answer. No attendant appeared. Even the traffic manager of the railway in his silk hat did not arrive to apologise for and explain the monstrous delay. The young man rang again. No answer. Others rang. The passengers seemed to join in a concerted game of ringing the bell.

At length an attendant did arrive, respectful surprise on his ingenuous face. Was it possible that anybody had rung? It could not be possible. The youth called loud his order.

"What is the matter?" snapped the hag-beauty.

"The matter, madam?"

"Yes, why have we stopped?"

"I really couldn't say, madam."

The serf was suave but firm. The authority of all railway systems was behind the expression of

his features, which said: "Have the goodness not to meddle with what does not concern you, and what is beyond you. If we stop, we stop. That is our affair. You are only parcels, and the convenience of parcels is not entitled to attention."

The attendant vanished and did not return. The bell-game was at an end.

As for Alan, he was perturbed and indignant because, though the boat at Folkestone would certainly await the train, and the boat-train at Boulogne would certainly await the boat, there was a probability that if the delay extended much more, his through-coach would not be attached to the impatient express at Paris and would be put on to a slower train. In which case he would fail at the rendezvous with his wife. The rendezvous had no importance; at worst, his holiday in the South would be shortened by a dozen hours. But he hated to fail at a rendezvous. He never failed at a rendezvous. And to fail at this rendezvous would be a *contretemps* which presented itself to him as the worst conceivable misfortune in life.

On the other hand, the thought comforted him that a train misfortune in England would somehow render less likely an accident in France—that country of frightful railway accidents. Since two mishaps could never occur to one passenger on one journey, the present trouble must in some mysterious manner favourably affect the chances of safety on the continent. Ridiculous! He knew it was ridiculous. But so ran, and persisted in running, the

ratiocination of an educated and experienced man who had been nurtured in logic and was past the climacteric.

Then voices were heard on the track outside. The hag-beauty was ripening for a critical scenic display with her husband. But the husband, resourceful, had one of his inspirations. He got up and left the car; and the lady, basely deprived of an adversary, was reduced to inactivity. After a few moments Alan rose too and followed the coward to the doors of the car.

The door on the near side was open. Alan opened the other one. The air stung his skin. The sun was clouded over. He was chilled in a moment, for he had removed his overcoat in the heated car. He might catch a cold, but he argued that the grave crisis in which he found himself would save him from a cold. There was no sense in this argument either.

He stood on the high threshold of the car and looked at the lovely soft, bare, variegated landscape, and the tender sky above it, and wondered for the tenth of a second what Wordsworth would have thought about them. "Lines written in a train halted in the midst of a Kentish landscape." Would Wordsworth have ignored the big placard established in a meadow opposite naming the name of a magic medicine and the number of miles from London?

The train was arrested and lay moveless as though under an enchantment. By leaning forth

Alan could see the curve succession of coaches on the curved track, and the engine so nonchalantly smoking. He saw the bright steel up-line in a corresponding curve, wedged in fish-plates that were nailed to sleeper after sleeper; thousands of sleepers, millions of serried sleepers stretching all the way to London and all the way to Folkestone and Dover; and the tens of millions of road-metal pebbles, smoothed out, raked flat, combed! And in the misty distance a tall, frail signal—at danger. No luxury here. Nothing but the naked bones and backbone and bottom foundation of a system. Here a train de luxe was no better than a common goods-train or a third-class excursion-train. All luxury seemed forlorn, pathetic, comic, fragile as a bride-cake: for ever under threat of destruction. The through-coach would miss the connection at Paris. Disaster! God was not in his heaven.

Passengers were now growing bolder in wrong-doing. One after another they jumped down from the cars, until there were fifteen or twenty in the six-foot way. And, while at first they dared not stir more than a few feet from the close proximity of the doors whence they had descended, little by little they walked further and further, at last even taking "constitutionals" along the line in order to keep warm, and beating their arms

"Twenty-seven minutes," said a man looking at his watch, as he passed under Alan. Alan wanted to ask him if he knew the cause of the delay, but he refrained—from pride. He was too proud to

enquire. Nobody knew the cause of the delay. Why had the train stopped so suddenly? Why had it stopped so far short of the warning signal? No answers to such enigmas. Not an official on the track. The railway company was maintaining its traditional, god-like, majestic, indifferent reticence; and every employee was obeying the secret injunction: Give nothing away.

"It's to be hoped the train behind won't run into us."

The voice of the dastard old husband, who had moved across the platform of the car and was now immediately behind Alan and peeping over his shoulder. What an alarming notion!

"Yes," said Alan vaguely.

"But of course it can't now. It was only five minutes behind us. It must have stopped too, somewhere up the line."

"Yes," said Alan again.

The man spoke quite pleasantly, as if desirous but not over-anxious to be sociable. No trace of the grim in his tone now. Indeed he showed an agreeable personality. His nerves had rapidly recovered from the nerves of his wife. Like Alan he would disclose no curiosity concerning the cause of the delay. He accepted it stoically, as a decree of God. They talked. Then "Excuse me," said the husband, and passed in front of Alan, and dropped down on to the line. Perhaps he feared that the hag-beauty was after him.

A woman appeared from the head of the train.

It was Miss Office. She had her hands in the pockets of her cloak, like a man, and by means of them drew the cloak tight about her. As she approached Alan saw that she was smiling—to herself. She waved to him, not as a secretary but as a woman sharing with him an adventure.

"This is a nice business," she called, and laughed. Then added: "But I'm sorry for the old people in the train. This sort of thing always upsets them."

Alan thought:

"Why was I thinking so unkindly of those people in the car? Can they help being themselves?" And he began to think kindly of them, to find excuses for them, and his heart lightened.

"You don't happen to know what's wrong?" he quizzed Miss Office.

"It's something to a train in front," she said simply.

"Who told you?"

"The guard. Well, he didn't exactly tell me; but he sort of hinted."

"Oh! So the guard talks to you, does he?"

"Well, he was frightfully nice to me at Victoria about my seat. So I just asked him."

Strange how the faithful Irene always chummed up with officials and those who actually did things! A sort of free-masonry, helped no doubt by her frank, friendly expression.

"I say," Alan asked her, quite unpremeditatedly. "That wasn't Mrs. Jack that got into the other train at Victoria, was it?"

She did not say "When? Where? What do you mean, Mr. Frith-Walter!" Her face admitted that she knew what he meant. And her face, he imagined, grew a rosier pink. Instantly he was apprehensive.

"Oh *no*!" said Miss Office. "It couldn't be, could it? She's in the North, isn't she? And she'd have let you know if she was coming through, I'm sure. It couldn't have been Mrs. Jack."

"No, of course it couldn't."

But he now more seriously than ever suspected that Pearl was in the train behind.

After a while an official inexplicably appeared, running along the length of the train and motioning with his arms. "All aboard." The bold passengers became frightened sheep and ran to and fro to find their pens, and in a trice the track was empty. The engine whistled. The train started. And why it had started people knew no more surely than why it had stopped. The sinister secret was sternly kept.

## CHAPTER V

# THE CONFIDENCE

THE ship was in mid-Channel, moving swiftly and smoothly over the smooth, rippled water, which caused her neither to pitch nor to roll,—the ship rode with triumphant urgency. Astern of her the high cliffs of England were obscured in a tenuous white mist; ahead, the lower coasts of France rose more inviting and absolutely clear. The winter sun warmed; the tonic air wooed the cheeks and the sun put exquisite colour into the sea. Alan leaned on his fore-arms over the starboard rail, and watched the slow, sure progression of cargo-steamers, a Thames barge in full sail, and some fishing-smacks that seemed with plaintive perseverance to be soliciting alms from the deep.

He had not encountered Miss Office. He had not caught sight of Pearl—but then he had not cared nor dared to look for her systematically in the crowded, complex organism of the vessel littered with luggage and chairs and passengers somnolent or briskly alert; she might be hidden away in the inviolable ladies' cabin. He preferred the uncertainty to the assurance of trouble.

A man came and leaned by his side against the rail. It was the husband of the hag-beauty. A shortish, stout old man of perhaps seventy odd, with a pink face set off by white hair and moustache, protruding lips reminiscent of an American, small, steely blue eyes, a firm chin, and a very firm, half-defiant expression. His features relaxed into a smile as Alan turned, Alan nodded and smiled amicably. They were like old acquaintances.

"Nothing to worry about after all," said Alan lightly, divining that the other wanted the distraction of a talk.

"No!" the old man agreed.

As a fact, the train had arrived only a little more than twenty minutes late at Dover; the luggage had been whisked on board at speed, and the sea-passage promised to be rapid. One of the ship's ticket-collectors had prophesied that the French train would leave Boulogne within five minutes of time. How absurd, now, all the expense of spirit during the mysterious, endless halt on the line! A lesson, that experience, as to the weak folly of fussing about the safety of the bridge before you had to cross it.

"No!" the old man repeated. "Nothing to bother over as far as *that* goes. I did think at one time the through-coach at Boulogne might miss the express at the Gair de Lion, but we shall be all right now."

"Oh!" said Alan, brightening his smile. "You're going beyond Paris too, are you? So 'm I."

He indicated a satisfaction which he did not feel, but he was bound to be pleasant to the old man, even though he shuddered at the prospect of dinner and perhaps breakfast in a restaurant-car near to, or perhaps at the same table with, the terrible hag-beauty. He was full of sympathy for the old man.

"My dear wife," said the old man abruptly, preoccupied, showing no satisfaction answering to Alan's; and stopped.

"She's not ill, I hope, on a day like this?" Alan stammered. He was thunderstruck by the phrase 'my dear wife,' accompanied as it had been by a strange momentary softening of the old man's hard eyes.

"She's in the ladies' cabin. She always disappears on board, whatever the weather. I couldn't get a private cabin. You never can if you don't book one ten years in advance. I gave the stewardess a ten-shilling note, but I didn't like the look of the woman." His eyes had hardened again.

"I'm sorry," Alan murmured.

"Talk about worry!" the old man continued. Alan saw that he had been resisting the impulse to confide in a stranger, but the impulse had overcome his natural reserve at last. "My dear wife's had three very serious operations—very serious. It's marvellous to me how she's come through them. Sheer grit, I reckon. But they've upset her nervous system terribly. She didn't use to have a nerve in her whole body. Always cheerful

and ready for anything. Now she's all wires like the inside of a piano."

"Dear, dear!" Alan responded. "Some women do have dreadful experiences! Dreadful!"

The intense commiseration of his tone was a means of expressing, to himself, his intense shame at a false and unkindly judgment. Not without good reason, then, had he accused himself in the train of judging the occupants of the Pullman unkindly! His soul blushed, if not his cheeks.

The old man, shamed too, because of his importunate confidence to a stranger, turned aside to end the interview. (The truth was that he had much difficulty in keeping his anxieties to himself, and in the longing for self-expression and sympathy would state them to almost any stranger whose face pleased him and who would meet him halfway.) Then he turned back.

"I'm Lucass," said he, hissing the *ss* to indicate the spelling. "Lucass, Livewright & Co., Tyne. Retired long since. Used to be chairman. One of your rivals. You're Frith-Walter, aren't you?"

At the name of the great engineering firm, Alan smiled more sympathetically than ever, with genuine spontaneity, and held out his hand, which Mr. Lucass took.

"I'm delighted to know you. But how did you know me, Mr. Lucass?"

"Label on your suitcase," the old man answered drily, and walked off with his affliction and his shame.

The sea seemed still more exquisitely beautiful to Alan; the sunshine was a miracle. All the distant craft plodding through the waters had a sudden pathos. The big, urgent Channel-steamer itself, with its helpless load of luxury, had pathos. The French shore hid a beautiful land of charming and logical civilisation where things were understood that were not understood in England, and misunderstood which were understood in England. The very word "France" had pathos. Children delicious, appealing, and cruel—the French! The earth and all nature in its widest sense were invested with a wistful loveliness; and life became as delectable as it was sad. Alan fell into reflection.

"Here am I, a hard business man, and I know how Christ felt when he spoke the beatitudes."

He peeped at his socks, felt his necktie, glanced down at his handkerchief and his shirt-sleeves: all in harmony; and thought of hours spent in shops when for a space such trivialities were the most important and difficult affairs in life. And smiled tolerantly. He saw himself walking about, the image of correctness, good taste, security, wealth. And smiled tolerantly. Could any observer believe that his secret heart held what it held of aspiration, tenderness, humility before the formidable veiled face of destiny? Poor Pearl! What did it matter whether she was in a mess or not? In either case equally she needed sympathetic comprehension.

## CHAPTER VI

# CUSTOMS

THE passengers were in the Custom House at Boulogne: the eye of the needle. After the excitations and the somnolence of the voyage, after varied formalities, after being stared at hard by the suspecting eyes of officials, after crossing railway lines between enormous locomotives and passing along rope alley-ways guarded by armed soldiers of the Republic, all the passengers with all the hand-baggage that littered all the decks of the two-thousand ton steamer were herded and forced into a small barn-like interior of which the midst was occupied by a quadrangle of benches; upon these benches luggage was piled containing the intimate secrets of hundreds of lives.

The passengers, with no more pride than sheep, and no more sense, jostled and crushed one another in the frantic attempt to get near to the rampart of the quadrangle and to their possessions. And there were no rich and no poor and no gentlemen and no ladies; none but sheep vitalised by fear, impatience and resentment. Civilisation was destroyed, and men lived as though it had never been, shameless under the gaze of blue-smocked porters

who were not men but numbered myrmidons of some mysterious far-off deity omnipotent and terrible.

Within the quadrangle were a few beings of a higher order than the porters, nonchalant in the assurance of limitless power. They commanded, and were obeyed. They were without souls and —more important—without bowels. All sheep were equal in their sight, for they distrusted all in the completeness of their disillusion concerning sheep-nature. They carelessly pointed, and the gesture was equivalent to a ukase from which there was no appeal:

"Expose—and expose quickly."

And secrets were exposed, and the suzerains of omnipotence with ruthless hands probed for deeper secrets, and, if they found no sin, negligently marked leather with the magic sign of an algebraic root in white, and sheep, smiling sheepishly with relief at salvation from hell, hastened away, followed by porters stumbling under fantastic loads of acquitted goods, and these porters collided with other porters stumbling under other loads of other sheep's goods towards the bar of accusation. This was the Republic's welcome to its guests seeking the privilege of sowing the land of the Republic with fecund money; the Republic's contribution towards that benignant internationalism which alone would save the world from itself.

Waiting his turn at the rampart Alan felt a prod in his side. Mr. Lucass's chin had unfairly succeeded in taking the place of some released pas-

sengers, and the Lucass belongings—a numerous array of cases and packages and hat-boxes—were dumped down on to the rampart, and Mrs. Lucass, angry and shaken, stood close behind, telling, in a hysterical voice, her grim, silent man exactly what he must permit to be exposed and what not. Her mien, movements and tone were well calculated to arouse the most sinister irascibility of autocrats, and they had their effect. Old Mr. Lucass's hard blue eyes wished his dear wife at the devil; but she had been deprived for a full hour of the outlet for exasperated nerves which his society afforded, and she would not leave him nor hold her tongue nor keep still.

Alan, extremely irritated by the spectacle, thought that not three hundred operations could excuse her performances. He had no forgiveness for her. Her sufferings and the trials of the journey for that living wound were naught to him; the beatitudes were sentimental twaddle; he would have rejoiced to see her drop down dead. As for old Mr. Lucass, he ignored her, and tried grimly to soothe the autocrat before him in northern English —and failed. Suddenly Alan, to put an end to an intolerable situation, and quite selfishly, said to the autocrat in French: "I will occupy myself with all those things."

"*Quoi?*"

"I am a friend of Monsieur Crevel." (Monsieur Crevel being a super-autocrat invisible to common persons.)

"*Quoi?*" Very threateningly and brutally.

Another autocrat, catching the sacred name, touched the first autocrat on the shoulder.

"*Monsieur est un ami de Monsieur Crevel.*"

The features of the first autocrat changed in an instant from the autocratic to the cringing sycophantic. Alan, as he witnessed the metamorphosis, had a sickening glimpse of the lowest baseness of the heart of man; but he hypocritically smiled and nodded. Nothing in either Alan's baggage or the Lucasses' was exposed. The cases were marked for freedom; had they been full even of matches, the autocrats would have passed them with a benediction. Porters gathered them up in straps. The door of the Republic was thrown wide open.

"Let me find your compartment for you," said Alan, resolving to finish the job handsomely.

"You are really awfully kind," said the hag-beauty, and her face became beautiful with pleasure and gratitude. Then it altered to frightful scorn as she turned to her husband: "You see how it *ought* to be done!"

"I'm not kind at all. I only did it because I couldn't stick the sight of your disgusting behaviour," said Alan, but not aloud.

The next moment he was admitting to himself that he had in fact been very kind. His sympathy with old Mr. Lucass was positively passionate. And then, in the alleviating reaction from strain, he was forgiving and justifying everybody.

"They're bound to go on like that. How can

they help going on like that—all of 'em! Indignation is simply silly." Charity inspired him (but charity made him self-complacent). "I'm as bad as any of them," he thought.

He felt that Mrs. Lucass had charm, and the discovery was marvellous to him.

He joked with Mrs. Lucass, who laughed. He saw Miss Office walking out of the barn, a bag in either hand, smiling triumphantly in good temper. No porters for the self-sufficient Miss Office. A wonder, that girl!

He tasted the prospect of the enjoyment of fine Gallic civilisation! Scenes familiar and beloved and yet for ever strange!

It was just as they were leaving the Custom House, under the inimical gaze of two sentinel soldiers, that Alan for no reason whatever turned his head to glance at the thinning throng behind, and saw Pearl—unmistakably. Instantly he felt the weight anew on his heart. Her face recalled his son's wedding. He saw her again exactly as he had seen her in the motor-car, with Jack looking rather an abashed simpleton by her side, driving away to the station for the honeymoon. A face composed and somehow commanding, the face of one fully equal to the situation. A lovely blonde, with a perfect complexion. But the facial angle too marked; and the long, straight nose denoted a calm, reasoned egotism. He remembered the scarcely perceptible pursing of his wife's lips, indicative of reserves concerning the daughter-in-

law brought so surprisingly and tempestuously by Jack into the family group.

He was afraid. Why had there been no word from Pearl, no word from Jack? Of course the girl had not the least idea that her father-in-law would be travelling by just that Continental service; for neither he nor Jack was an ardent letter-writer, and he knew that mother-in-law and daughter-in-law rarely corresponded. Why had the girl left England? Where was she going? It struck him that her mother, an enigmatic creature whom Pearl apparently adored, might already be in the South, in one of those fashionable hotels in which she passed her life, and that her daughter was joining her. But why? The mother might be ill. No! The mother had a constitution of leather and was never ill. No! A married daughter in conjugal difficulties flew to an adored mother for moral support. That must be, was, the solution of the puzzle.

In one second, even as he glanced, Alan's swift mind had imagined a complete story of misfortune and disaster, in which the high-strung Jack played an undignified, perhaps an ignoble rôle. If Alan's wife had made such a baseless, purely fanciful conjecture, Alan would have smiled with superior masculinity, and advised her not to think in the manner of a hysterical schoolgirl. The conjecture was preposterous; it had not a leg to stand on. But Alan was making it in detail, and he could not rid himself of it. Why could he not be care-

free and happy for five minutes together? Was there no peace on his earth?

He knew his duty. He ought to walk straight up to the girl and accost her and boldly meet the crisis, whatever the crisis might be. But he did not. He had voluntarily promised to shepherd the Lucasses into the train, and he must do so. Obligation of the strong to the weak, etc. He could not decently desert the Lucasses. Moreover the train was due to leave. Supposing he missed it! Catastrophe! Of course it would not leave—half the passengers were still painfully awaiting entrance into the paradisiacal Republic. The train dared not leave. But supposing it did leave? French trains had been known to commit these enormities, with a shrug of the shoulders and a "*Que voulez-vous?*"

After all he might not have chanced to see Pearl. And what then? . . . And she was obviously so capable. There she was—he judged in the tenth of a second—calmly and masterfully addressing the autocrat within the quadrangle. Doubtless she was lying to him, for she would smoke only one brand of cigarettes (she smoked too much—a bad sign!), and she would certainly be smuggling her own brand quite unscrupulously into the Republic; all women were smugglers by birth and natural inclination. (A poor joke, he thought, even if based in truth.) She might get herself into a mess. Well, she would get herself out of it. He had a vision of the security of his reserved compartment. He longed to flop down in it and

relax, in the perfect assurance that it would be his ark till he quitted it upon arrival at his destination.

The two porters, heavily laden and bulging with luggage on either side of themselves like milkmaids carrying milk-pails, staggered in front of the party and halted, breathing quickly, at a coach the name on whose great romantic label stirred no sensation of romance in their hearts. A chocolate-coloured car-conductor appeared and took tickets and conned them as attentively as though he had never seen a ticket before, and then smiled and bowed and smirked to indicate his sure trust that the princes of the earth would be very generous when the distant moment in a distant place arrived for generosity. One of the porters climbed up the steep steps into the car, and the luggage was hoisted through the window piece by piece. One of the porters took his tip genially as manna from heaven; the other glowered doubtfully at the paper money in his palm and said not a word nor smiled a smile, but went off glum with an unspoken verdict upon the injustice of destiny.

"Nip up, my dear," said Old Mr. Lucass drily to his wife.

"What language!" Mrs. Lucass retorted, seizing the brass handles in order to raise her ungainly mass from the low platform. She smiled archly, first at her husband and then at Alan.

"I'm sure it's meant for a compliment," said Alan gaily.

They were all three conscious of the immense

solace of having miraculously found the through-coach and caught the train.

Mr. Lucass assisted his wife's body with a boyish push, and nipped up boyishly after her. Alan remained on the platform. He no longer feared the society of his charges on the long journey, rather anticipated it with satisfaction as he watched the irregular decreasing stream of travellers, porters, and baggage which issued from the Custom House to assault the passive train.

"If she isn't in the next fifty," he said to himself, thinking of Pearl, "I'll get in. It's too cold on this platform." (An excuse.)

She was not in the next fifty. He got in and sat down solitary, and would not look out of the window, and waited interminably. Nobody entered the through-coach, which was not full.

"She must be in the train by this time," he said to himself, and put his face against the window and watched. He could feel his heart beating with apprehension lest he might see her and be compelled by his inconvenient, pitiless conscience to make his presence known to her. He was afraid. She did not pass the window. When all hope had vanished of the train ever starting, it started—with a frightful jerk. Somewhere in the train Pearl must be moving with him towards Paris.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE TEA-CAR

ALAN searched the train for Pearl, forced to do so by his conscience against his inclination. Sheer hazard had brought himself and his daughter-in-law within sight of one another in the Custom House. Why should he seek trouble, especially as Pearl had obviously had no wish to meet him? Was it not silly, and perhaps morbid, to do so? But Alan's conscience would not always hear reason, though his mind was reasonable beyond the average; and in a struggle it would always in the end vanquish his mind, even after an apparent glorious victory of his mind.

Being by temperament methodical and thorough, he conducted his examination of the train in a manner which justified certainty about the result. Pearl was not in the train. Well, possibly she had got herself into a mess at the Custom House; or, in the alternative, as there had been another train awaiting the boat at Boulogne, she had taken it.

Alan ought rationally to have been relieved, but was not. He had much disliked the prospect and the business of clearing up the mystery of Pearl's journey by meeting her and questioning her; he had

weakly preferred to ignore the mystery. Yet now that he had failed to find her, and the mystery remained, he was more perturbed than ever—quite illogically.

At the finish of a wearisome journey through seemingly innumerable carriages of the long, shuddering, swerving, oscillating train, after being pitched impolitely from side to side of dim corridors, and asking ten thousand heedless and fat persons to make room for him to pass, and crossing the dangerous causeways between carriage and carriage, and peering with outwardly vulgar inquisitiveness into the intimacy of scores of compartments, he found himself once more in his own carriage, which was a sleeper and different in design from all the rest. He had a sensation of returning home.

Night was falling. The train was lit with many scores of lamps, and full of dark corners. Outside the windows the Republic slipping backwards was hardly visible. He did not know where the train was. It was a train somewhere in space; and it was indeed his home. He had marked his compartment by the individuality of his belongings, and the disposition of them. The attendant smiled at him as at an acquaintance who was ripening into a friend. He recognised the faces of other attendants and the faces of a few passengers. The young drink-ordering couple had acquired quite an old standing in his memory. He had seen them in England; now he saw them in France —and how English they were in France!

The door of the Lucasses' compartment was

open. Alan stopped, hesitant. He stopped partly because of the romantic strangeness of the spectacle within the compartment, partly by the desire for some comradeship in the half-hostile indifference of the train, and partly because he had done a good turn to the Lucasses and therefore somehow was under an obligation to them. He agreed with them once more that he really had been very good-natured in looking after them; he thought that they might properly have shown more gratitude than they in fact had shown; he had an impartial view of their shortcomings, and particularly of hers, and yet, again because he had done them a good turn, he defended them to himself against his own accusations; they had become his children.

Old Mr. Lucass was lying on the seat; the hag-beauty, the spoilt darling, was bending over him with an expression of the tenderest soothing concern in her peculiar eyes. The astonishing pair had exchanged rôles. The sense of the romance of the sexual relation, the romance which could thus defy age, was sharply awakened in Alan's heart. The respective attitudes of man and wife revealed to him as by a miracle the wondrousness of life, and of its inexhaustible, rich, dramatic surprises. Never could he have foreseen what he saw then. It was nothing, and it was tremendous.

Both of them looked at him. Mrs. Lucass seemed to bestow on him some of the benevolence with which she was enveloping her prostrate husband. Mr. Lucass, his head raised on a white pillow,

nearest the door, threw his glance round at the visitor.

"Hello, Frith-Walter!" said Mr. Lucass, familiarly and weakly.

"Hello!" Alan responded.

This was the former tyrant of the great Tyne firm, the legendary, pitiless protagonist of more than one colossal battle of industry in which workmen and their wives and children had starved—and the hardy despot had sworn that he would see them rot before he yielded one inch to their demands. And he had melted in fatigue beneath the solicitude of the terrible wife whom he adored! The remains of sandwiches littered the small table. Hand-luggage was everywhere. And Mrs. Lucass's knitting reposed on the floor against the copper spittoon provided by a conservative sleeping-car company for the needs of a past generation. The knitting absurdly touched Alan. He smiled at old Mr. Lucass because Mr. Lucass had once been a formidable rival and hence cordiality was his due. Besides, Alan liked the infirm and valorous relic.

Not merely the Lucasses' compartment, but the entire train was transformed for the befriender of age. He comprehended that without realising it he had been living, ever since the Boulogne Custom House, in a sort of vague nightmare, which had swallowed up and destroyed all his spiritual aspirations, his joy in the holiday, his Wordsworth-induced feeling for the simplicities and the fundamentals of a right existence. In the Folkestone

train he had begun a new life, and already he had been forgetting the renascence! And why? The apparition of Pearl! And now Mr. and Mrs. Lucass in the domesticity of their compartment lifted his soul and made the moving train miraculous and lovely by the pathos of its freight of human beings in search of happiness. Happiness came to him there, in the train. Also a cheerful courage. If Pearl's enigmatic journey meant trouble for him or his, he would be capable of handling it with skill, gaiety and charity. Nothing could be too much for his energy and resource.

At that moment an attendant hurried along the corridor ringing a bell. The signal at last for tea! Two luncheons had been served in the restaurant-car, and now the harried staff were to provide tea for which people who could not face a lunch or possessed no tickets for lunch had been clamouring and pestering them without cease since Boulogne.

"Come, Ernest," implored the hag-beauty. "Tea will do you good."

"Damn tea!" Mr. Lucass retorted grimly. "Haven't I had brandy? If *you* have tea that will do me more good than drinking it myself. Can't you see? Be off with you. Get out. And turn off the light and shut the door. Eh, Frith-Walter?"

It was all so pleasant, so intimate, so natural, that Alan just laughed in reply to Mrs. Lucass's easy, tolerant smile. And moreover he was flattered that the pair should admit him thus ingenuously and candidly into their privacy. The hag-

beauty, oblivious of her invalid state, went off with him to the restaurant-car, having first carefully shut the door on her Ernest.

"Quick!" she cried. "Before all the seats are taken!"

And in the promiscuity of the restaurant-car, aiming uncertainly at the mouth cups of tea that were travelling across the Republic at a hundred kilometres an hour, she maintained the same mood amid the continuous vibration of crockery and the babble of many voices and the jingle of her own bracelets. She was over fifty. Her body had lost its shape. Her face was a ruin. The thin hair at the top of the forehead was a sign of a querulous and tireless spirit. The complexion was that of a chronic sufferer. The eyes set so near each other indicated some malice. But those eyes looked out from her soul into the world with a youthful and energetic sexual challenge; they were exciting eyes; they compelled the interest of the male, and all that was masculine in Alan responded to them eagerly. Alan had a new sense of vitality, because those eyes expected him to be adventurously masculine, assumed their power to move him. She was agreeable, talked with extraordinary freedom, and showed quite frankly that she liked Alan and knew that he would like her.

"Of course Ernest's been telling you about me," she said. "He does tell people about me. He thinks I don't know it. But I know. He tells them it's my illnesses have changed me. Nothing of the kind. I was always the same. He puts it

on to my illnesses because he worships me, and his pride wouldn't let him think that he could worship any woman that wasn't perfect. Most men are like that. I daresay it's their conceit, but it doesn't matter what you call it. You see I'm a woman and a man too. I know how exasperating I am. I know better than he does, and he knows better than anybody else. I'm spoilt because I've proved millions of times that I can make him forget all my cruelty with just one smile. It's very unfair, but he likes it like that, and I suppose I can't help it. At least I could, but . . . A man can only be managed in one way, and it's always the same way, and a different way for each man. I don't know why I should be going on to you in this style."

"Neither do I," thought Alan. And said aloud: "It's very interesting. And I must say I think your husband's delightful."

She was plainly provincial. She wore no powder; her intonations were coarser than those of London; she had even a slight burring northern accent. But she fascinated him. And she revealed to him the insipidity of Elaine, his wife, so nice-looking, so placid, so reasonable, so capable, so conscientious, so acquiescent and so colourless. Elaine was three years younger than himself. Mrs. Lucass was probably three years older than himself. But whereas he felt much younger than Elaine, towards Mrs. Lucass he felt as a mature, still questing man of experience might feel towards

a precocious and exceptionally intelligent young girl who had everything to learn and yet knew everything by instinct.

Mrs. Lucass was a creature for whom existence was a continuous, charming, frightful, perilous battle between two sexes. And yet she was not coquettish—or she was coquettish so subtly that few would detect her in coquetry. She despised the minor weapons of warfare. She had no more conscience than Elizabeth or Catherine. She would be capable of enormities, and after committing them would not deny them. Her generalisations about men and women were as crude and misleading as nearly all such generalisations. Their contraries would have been just as convincing, and she might well have enunciated their contraries with a similar assurance of deep wisdom. But some truth was in them.

And what a woman! What a woman now, and what a woman she must have been a quarter of a century earlier! Youth and beauty and bodily strength had been stripped from her. Her empire had been narrowed down to one old man. But, indomitable, she was not defeated—rather victorious. An irascible hag—enkindling that fine example of the experienced man of the world, Alan, who had moreover been strongly prejudiced against her by seeing her at her worst! Yes, Alan pictured himself at one moment as the man of the world dealing with a precocious girl; but at the next he was a callow young man rendered clumsy

and speechless by the brilliance of an idolised feminine individuality. All very confusing and delicious.

"I like Ernest to have to give in sometimes—I mean his body. He's always saying how old he is. But he never wants anyone to believe it. He wants everyone to think how young he is for his age. And the older he makes himself out to be of course the more astonishing his youthfulness seems. Vanity, naturally. Did you notice him push me up into the carriage at Boulogne? He loved doing that. Boyish. . . . But he isn't really strong. He couldn't have stood half what I've been through." She paused.

"Go on!" said Alan. "Go on! You ought to have said that no man could have stood it. You always say that. Please may I have some more tea?" He laughed.

"Yes," said she, ignoring the demand for tea. "And then you'd have said it was only because women aren't so sensitive to pain as men! But you can't argue like that with me because I won't give you the chance. I love your necktie, but it wouldn't suit Ernest. I buy all Ernest's for him, and if I'm too ill to go out I make the shop-people come to the house. I know all you Tynesiders think Ernest is a terrible fellow. But he isn't. Yes, he is, only I'm more terrible."

"I suppose you always talk about Ernest," Alan quizzed her.

"Yes, I *do*. And what then? He's the greatest

man the Tyneside ever saw. And don't you all know it! Only nobody knows him but me."

"Your life's been a romance," said Alan, who was thrilled by the thought of her life with Ernest. "And still is."

"It hasn't. It's been hell."

"But you like hell."

"Well, of course I like hell," said she. "Here's your tea. Hell's the great place for romance. . . . Would that be your son staying at the Majestic at Harrogate last month?"

"It might have been," said Alan, startled.

"I thought it must have been as soon as Ernest told me today who you were. So did Ernest. . . . Was he with his wife?"

"Yes, I expect my daughter-in-law would be there too," Alan uneasily admitted. Strange that old Lucass had not mentioned having come across Jack at Harrogate. "Did you see anything of them?"

"Not to speak to. They only stayed at the Majestic three or four days. But we saw them all right."

Something most peculiar and disconcerting in her tone, thought Alan. Something of a half-malevolent innuendo.

"I knew he couldn't keep out of here," said Mrs. Lucass, with a smile large and happy and malicious.

Old Mr. Lucass had feebly entered the tea-car.

## CHAPTER VIII

## RUMOUR

THE Gare de Lyon, headquarters of the vast system of transport which a Minister of State had once, in an impassioned oration delivered after a grand official banquet, poetically described as "one of the glories of France"! The through-carriage from Boulogne, all solitary, pushed by an insignificant shunting-engine, moved very slowly along the interminable platform, moved more and more slowly, hardly did move, until there was a percussion and a re-percussion, and it stood moveless. With a quarter of an hour to spare it had at last caught and joined the great Rome Express, timed to leave Paris nightly at ten minutes past seventeen o'clock.

Impatiently, joyously, Alan jumped down on to the platform, in whose distances people walked about like pigmies. Already men were coupling the Boulogne coach to the main part of the train; they did it with Gallic excitement, indifference and expostulations, as if they were saying: "Better that this carriage should not break loose; do not therefore be wantonly negligent; but if it does break loose, *que voulez-vous?*"

The cold of the station atmosphere, after the

heat of the carriage, penetrated overcoats. Alan walked energetically to and fro, surveying the train from end to end. It was densely populated, and judging from the countenances against the windows and further within, chiefly by Anglo-Saxons. They alone owned the world; scarcely a dark Latin face in the whole panorama of physiognomies. Only the restaurant-car, immaculate, spruce and gleaming with white linen and glass and polished metals, was empty—save for an attendant setting flowers on the tables. The salt of the earth could not swallow their food without the sight of flowers to cheer them on through the succession of courses. Baskets of fresh fruit also. A white-capped chef, towel wrapped loosely round neck, leaned forth from the brass bar of his inferno, from which shot a blast of odorous heat. Clocks, enormous clocks everywhere! Their long hands showed four minutes to seventeen, and then simultaneously the hands jumped and showed three minutes to seventeen. Here, time did not fly; it leaped like a grasshopper, from minute to minute under an impulse of electricity generated miles away in some huge throbbing interior of whirring wheels, furnaces, boilers, and greasy pale mannikins.

On a far platform, beyond several lines of rails, Alan saw men and women hurrying into a train—train with a common little locomotive and many narrow compartments marked with a "3". They had no luggage bigger than handbags; they carried newspapers, some of them. Suburbans going

home, to-night and every night, to their small flats and their simple evening soup, and their tiny enormous worries. The same lives were being lived here, in this city of romance and prestige, as were lived at Waterloo and Liverpool Street. And these were the elect of their kind, for they must have left their bureaux and their factories as early as four-thirty.

Disconcerting, troubling, this spectacle! Why were they humbled, and why was he, Alan, among the salt of the earth, with flowers for dinner, and not a third-class, nor even a second-class, on his mighty and exclusive train? What had he done to gain his paradise? The structure of society was inexplicable. . . . Crude reflections!

He turned away. But he was safe. He hugged his good fortune, drew it closely about him as he drew his overcoat closely about him against the cold. He had caught the Rome Express. On every carriage of his train shone the immortal name of Rome, and glittered in gold the impressive words: "Grands Express Européens." He had not a care in the world, and he had escaped from the phantom Pearl. He felt the first delicious sensations of hunger, for since breakfast he had eaten nothing but some bread-and-cheese on the steamer, and some toast and cake on the Boulogne-Paris train with Mrs. Lucass.

He turned again to look at the suburban train. Its place was empty. It had silently vanished into the darkness of one of the glories of France. A gulp in his throat. Why? After all, there was

nothing new in these notions concerning the contrasts of existence. He had had them, vaguely, for years. Sometimes they had formulated themselves as from his office-window he had watched thousands of the firm's employees hurrying, hurrying out of the yard gates, a pathetic procession under arc lights, at the sound of release given by a shrieking siren. But of late these notions had been growing clearer in outline, less vague, more insistent: the spirit of the age besieging, investing, the citadel of his conscience. What noble, charitable, illuminating lines would Wordsworth have written had he stood in the Gare de Lyon and seen the suburban train steal with its cargo forth and disappear, leaving the imperial, bright Rome Express to await the strictly appointed hour of its own departure? He could not imagine what Wordsworth would have written. Nevertheless, while finding no words he thought that he thought like Wordsworth, with the same embracing, comprehending, loving, brooding mind. Wordsworth had influenced him, softened him, lifted him, made him happier. It amounted to a sort of miracle.

Yes, and he exulted in the grandeur of the Rome Express, and all that it symbolised of romance. The journey had now really begun. As far as Paris England and the familiar prose of England had seemed to be trailing after him. The Paris train was impregnated with English ideas and traditions. It was not fully "foreign," and the English were not foreigners in it. But the Rome

Express was different. Inhabited though it was by Anglo-Saxons, run though it was chiefly in their interests and impossible to conceive without them, the Rome Express was essentially foreign and had the perfect romance of the foreign. The far-reaching spell of England was broken. And it was the halting, apparently interminable journey round the slums of Paris that had broken the spell. What a pilgrimage of horrors! (No, not horrors. Wordsworth would have seen in it something finer than horrors.) The sidings; the shunting yards; the foul, slatternly, clanging factories smoking and flaming in the darkness; the dim, miserable, deserted stations, at which no train ever stopped; the names of the stations scarcely decipherable under oil-lamps; the signal lights that with everlasting patience gleamed their admonitions; the high buildings packed with homes—a window lit here and there, glimpses of domesticity through half-drawn curtains, white washing that waved slowly in the smutty gloom; and then the infinitely deliberate arrival beneath the lofty vaulted roofs of the terminus that in addition to being a terminus was a new beginning!

The prodigious long-distance engine, concealing its strength, rolled with the most deceptive soft gentleness into the station; it was pushing in front of it a coach and a brake-van. The train was at last made up. Officials grew active. Then a group of passengers, three men and a woman, went past Alan on the platform, and he heard the English words:

"And they say that both trains caught fire."

"No. Only one. The Marseilles train."

"I tell you it was like this."

The group stopped quite close to Alan, talking somewhat eagerly, and recounting again and again as people will when they are excited. He heard in confused detail the recital of an accident, a collision, which had happened earlier in the afternoon near Lyons. The number of victims was variously stated—thirty, fifty, a hundred; very many deaths, some persons burned alive. One of those disasters which give a major thrill to the readers of every daily paper in the world and which become historic in the annals of railway travelling. Ministers of State, he heard, were already en route by special train to the scene of the catastrophe, in accordance with the French custom.

And he had hitherto caught no rumour of the affair so tremendous and terrible! He was travelling by express; in a few minutes he would be rushing through the darkness at a hundred kilometres an hour, just as the fated trains had been rushing—but by daylight. People as thoughtless and unapprehensive as himself, perhaps bound like himself on pleasure, had been anticipating as a matter of course the satisfactory end of a journey; and now, after frightful agony, they were incinerated corpses! The smashed train was probably still at that moment going up in fire; bodies were still pinned in the wreckage; sufferers were still yelling to be put out of their misery; doctors were still at work, and automobiles were still flying across

the country side with the maimed and the dying. Severed limbs were strewn about. Blood. . . .

Horrible images filled his mind. Also he was dismayed by the mere fact that only by chance had he got wind of the accident. It was better to know. He might have started off in ignorance, ignorantly light-hearted. He would have boldly joined the group and asked questions, but, for the second time that day, his natural British reserve held him back. And what more could he learn? The group would only begin the story all over again.

"You needn't be a bit afraid, my dear," said one of the men to the woman. "Two accidents like that don't happen in one day."

Superstition! Yet Alan himself had been exactly as superstitious in his private reasoning about the still mysterious mishap on the Southern Railway in England. At any rate that mishap had not had the magic power to prevent an accident in France! Perhaps the magic power could not cross the sea! He laughed harshly within himself at himself. But such and similar fantastically idiotic ideas did indeed occur to him.

The group walked along the train and boarded it. The officials had their eyes on clocks and were calling insistently: "*En voiture.*" Their faces gave not a sign of calamity. Alan climbed into his carriage. The people in the corridor there seemed to have a quite ordinary demeanour. Surely they must know the fearful fact. Alan felt heavy with the tidings. The tidings were somehow in the

air; he was breathing them; they permeated the carriage, the train, the entire station; they gave him a curious feeling of blameworthiness—as though he had been privy to the catastrophe; he suspected that he had a guilty look. It was most odd. He ought to inform the Lucasses. But then he might upset Mrs. Lucass, if not the grim old man. On the other hand, supposing that he kept silence and afterwards they reproached him: "What! You knew, and you said nothing to us!" How could he answer the reproach? He stood hesitating. Then the floor of the carriage trembled slightly. The station was gliding slowly past the windows of the train.

Alan might have gone straight into his compartment, his home, his castle, and shut the door and read Wordsworth till dinner; but the desire, morbid no doubt, to see the Lucasses was growing in him. He would pass their compartment; if they hailed him he would tell them the news: if not, he would take that for a sign that he might postpone the narration, or escape it by the talkativeness of somebody else. Their door was open. He stopped.

"What's this about an accident?" Mrs. Lucass demanded abruptly.

He was abashed by the directness of the attack.

"How—how did you hear of it?" he asked.

"Then you did know? Why didn't you tell us? Before the train started?" said Mrs. Lucass, with a certain provincial tartness.

There it was: the reproach which he had foreseen! Evidently the lady was disturbed. And

she was treating him with the brusque freedom which is usually bestowed only upon old friends.

"A fellow came in here just now and told us," old Mr. Lucass explained, more smoothly.

"Who? Anyone you know?"

"Don't know him from Adam. He just walked by and told us. Seemed full of it." Mr. Lucass sniggered, rather self-consciously.

Without being asked, and yet by the wish of the occupants, Alan came further into the compartment and closed the door.

"I couldn't tell you before," said Alan defensively. "I only heard of it this minute—just as the train was leaving."

"Who told you? What did you hear? How do people get to know about these things?"

Mrs. Lucass's tones clearly indicated that she was losing control of those mysterious organs, her nerves. She began to knit, jerkily. She was no longer the woman who had half-humorously fenced with Alan at tea. There was a gleam in her eye, but a dangerous gleam, resentful, cruel, with no fun in it. She had become the woman who knew that she could tyrannise over her husband with impunity, could force him to pay any price for even superficial peace and the hope later of a smile; the unscrupulously self-indulgent woman. Alan had to relate his version of the story, while she watched him like a crouching tiger.

"A hundred killed!" she exclaimed indolently, angry. "That's what we heard. A hundred *killed*!"

"No, my dear," Mr. Lucass corrected. "He said a hundred victims—about a hundred. He said the figures weren't known yet."

"I don't care what *you* heard—*I* heard a hundred killed, and I expect there were more. He was trying to soothe us."

"Soothe us!"

"Yes. Besides, what does it matter? There's been an accident and there you are! If we'd been in an accident we shouldn't care whether there were a hundred killed or a thousand—especially if one of us was dead or crippled for life—to say nothing of the shock to the system. I simply can't understand all this quibbling about numbers."

Mrs. Lucass was growing more and more excited. Her husband, wise, made no reply. Alan, anxious to calm her, said:

"Well, we aren't in an accident. There's been one, and there won't be another. You can depend on that, dear lady."

"But that's only superstition," said Mrs. Lucass sharply. "And don't we all know that French railway accidents always go in twos! There's never one but there's another. Never. Everybody knows that. You only have to read the papers. All this comes of travelling on a Friday."

Alan thought:

"Good God! Here she talks about me being superstitious, and the next second she's going on about accidents happening in twos and about travelling on Friday! Does she want all railways

to be shut up on Fridays? Women are impossible. All women are impossible. They're all alike."

Elaine was one of the Friday-fearers. Remarkably acquiescent as a rule, she was adamantine against Fridays. "It's no use, Alan," she would say, "I won't do it." And she wouldn't. He remembered an occasion when Thursday fell on the thirteenth, and they had not been able to travel between Wednesday and Saturday. Yet Elaine was an educated woman of the twentieth century! Incredible! Monstrous! Elaine, however — he would say that for her—never lost her nerve. She would have kept quite calm and amenable at the news of forty accidents. Never was she flustered. He would have liked her to be flustered sometimes. He had a secret longing for adventure, and life with Elaine was not an adventure, and never could be. He was jealous of old Mr. Lucass, whose life with Mrs. Lucass must be one endless succession of adventures—perilous, exasperating, but vitally interesting. Old Mr. Lucass lived; Alan did not. Such was Alan's verdict. Stranger still, he thought:

"Supposing there *is* something in this Friday business. People have believed in it for hundreds of years: perhaps thousands! I shouldn't be surprised if everyone who travels on a Friday is secretly afraid. Am I? Yes, I daresay I am. The old lady is only saying out loud what we all think."

And he seemed to recall that French railway accidents did have a habit of happening in twos.

More, he had known them happen in sequences of threes and fours. Women were terrible.

"Well," he said brightly, and easily, and also superiorly—he could not keep superiority out of his tone—"We shall see what we shall see. There's always the efficacy of prayer, isn't there?" He prepared to leave the compartment.

"Yes, that's all very well," said Mrs. Lucass uncompromisingly, "but if I'd known a minute or two earlier I shouldn't have been in this train now. No! That I shouldn't!"

"But what would you have done, Mrs. Lucass?"

"I should have got out, bless the man! I should have waited in Paris *till things had quietened down a bit.*" She snorted. "Look at it. Look at it!" the train shook over some points and swayed round a curve. "We're just caught like rats in a trap, that's what we are! Caught like rats in a trap!"

Alan could only give a placatory smile. He could think of absolutely nothing to say; and he perceived that there was policy in the strict silence of Mr. Lucass.

"See you at dinner, perhaps," he suggested, far more out of politeness than from any desire to see them at dinner.

Mr. Lucass nodded, grimly amiable.

"You may see Ernest," said Mrs. Lucass, indicating by a disdainful movement of the lips that for herself she could not tolerate the restaurant-car, for all its flowers and its fresh fruits.

Alan glanced an au revoir at the couple, benevolently, half-enviously. The hag was now para-

mount in Mrs. Lucass, the spoiled and ruthless hag-beauty. All her shapeless body seemed to be simmering or fermenting beneath the ruined skin and the vague, ignoble clothes she wore. Tiny bubbles of issuing spit formed between her lips. She knitted furiously. Her bracelets jingled to express continuously the enormity of her grievance against God, his universe, and all his creatures.

"Leave us!" her burning eyes said to Alan. "This is our affair, our private life. He is mine, and I'm his, and you are only in the way. With him I can be myself. I must be myself or else die for it. I will heap troubles on him if I choose, and it shall concern no one but ourselves."

She was like a man clearing his house in order to beat his wife at ease. And Mr. Lucass's mien was resigned, rocky, indomitable. They might love each other or hate each other, they might be in heaven or in hell—they were intimately and inseparably attached, and this attachment was the greatest, the only heroical factor in their joint existence. Alan felt regretfully as though he were quitting palpitating life, glorious and dreadful, for the pale ennui of torpor. He was glad to go, yet opened the door with reluctance. The door opened outwards into the narrow corridor.

"I *beg* your pardon!" he exclaimed, with really apologetic alarm, for he had crashed the edge of the door into the slim elegant frame of a young woman who happened to be passing. This young woman was Pearl.

## CHAPTER IX

## NEWS OF JACK

ALAN felt a shock far greater than the physical shock. The lees of his mind seemed to be suddenly shaken up and all sorts of strange particles to be swimming and swirling in the thought-fluid. He had imagined that he was free of Pearl and any worries that her presence might presage; he had definitely dismissed her. And there she was, as startled at the sight of him as he at the sight of her. He must pull himself together for the encounter; she was doing similarly. First, with his habitual prudence, he smilingly closed the door of the compartment of the Lucasses. Pearl was very close to him in the vibrating, rumbling corridor; no other person in view.

"Well," he began, "of all the—— Jack here too?" The last three words were not convincingly said: they divulged his self-consciousness.

With a faint, puzzling, and somehow slightly superior smile, Pearl shook her head in answer to the question. She let him take her hand; the response of her gloved fingers to the pressure of his was hardly perceptible; did her fingers respond or did they not? She was watchful, defensive,

planning tactics to suit the rapidly developing circumstances of the occasion.

He respected her, decided that she had the capacity to be formidable. She was perhaps showing more self-possession than her father-in-law. An opponent—if an opponent—not to be trifled with! How beautiful—save that the facial angle was a bit too pronounced and the nose a bit too long! How sweet! Evidently she had just been titivating herself. Her complexion was exquisitely arranged, and the rouge brightened her hazel eyes. Her pale hair was lovely. She was delicately perfumed. She wore her simple oatmeal-coloured travelling costume with marked elegance. One of those young women who will not permit themselves to go to pieces even on a long railway journey!

And how young! What a contrast with Mrs. Lucass! What a contrast with Elaine! Another generation. He himself was cut off from her by the vast spreading expanse of a quarter of a century. But he did not, could not, feel himself to be appreciably her senior. His age was an illusion created by the calendar. He felt as young as on the day when Jack was born. He felt her equal. But he was saddened by the thought that she must inevitably regard him as old.

Nevertheless she herself had changed. It was not that she looked older—she looked merely more mature, sophisticated, subtle, knowledgeable; she had eaten of the tree. It was an ingenuous maid, for all her composed, kindly, fair-minded air of

being determined to protect her own interests, that Jack had brought to his parents, as if half-defiantly saying to them: "This is mine. This is what I have chosen, whether you like it or not." It was a maid that had driven off with Jack for the honeymoon. Alan had not seen her since. Now he saw a married woman who had lost the unique glance and bloom of virginal innocence. Grievous, in a way, but magnificent, this transformation! And he was her husband's father, and therefore by convention on terms of intimacy with her. But in fact he was not intimate with her at all; he scarcely knew her. Jack had whirled her off, on his impulsive courses, not wilfully, but negligently, secretive. The parents' information about the movements and doings of the couple had always been very vague.

"You look extremely fine," said Alan, adding with cautious respect, "if I may say so."

"Do I?" These were her first words, murmured.

She had shifted from him a yard or so. He surveyed her, and then admiringly met her eyes, and then glanced at her feet. The expensive shoes had no cross-straps; the top edges of them were scalloped with a microscopic ornament that invited inspection.

"Where did you pick up that dress, my dear?"

She named a Paris house with a branch in London.

"What they call 'three-piece,' isn't it?"

She nodded again.

"And what's that fur on the collar?"

"Lynx."

"Oh! So that's lynx, is it? Well, now tell me. How have you managed to be in this train? You weren't in the through-carriage from Boulogne."

"No. I was too late to get a place in the through-carriage. I drove across Paris from the Gare du Nord."

(Then she must have escaped his search of the Boulogne-Paris train.)

"Now, if you'd only let me know I'd have fixed everything up for you. I expect you haven't heard that the Sleeping-Car Company is my toy and my washpot."

"No, I hadn't. And there wasn't time to let you know."

"But didn't you sleep in London last night?"

"No. I caught the Scottish express at Newcastle."

"And you don't look in the least tired after it."

"I'm going to see mother," said Pearl.

"She's not ill?"

"Oh no! Mother's never lost a tooth and never had a day's illness. But she's lonely rather, and I'm spending New Year with her."

The girl spoke in an unemotional, even voice; her tone and articulation were beautiful. Alan guessed instinctively that she was playing for position. He too was playing for position. All their words were meant to cover up their thoughts. He forbore to make another allusion to Jack. Jack was his son, and, if trouble had arisen between her

and Jack, she would be counting him, Alan, among the enemy forces. Pooh! How had he got this silly, far-fetched idea into his head? She was going to spend the New Year with her lonely mother: and that was all. And yet no! She was surely acting a part. Anyhow he would leave her to be the first to mention Jack again.

"You got a compartment to yourself, my dear?"

"I wish I had. I'm sharing with a spinster who's on an art-pilgrimage. She talks all the time and reads me her notes on the Louvre. She's taken her boots off—boots!—and put on a man's bedroom slippers." Pearl laughed tolerantly, but disdainfully. Not a reassuring laugh.

"Come and see *my* cabin—I mean compartment," said Alan.

"I will," she agreed willingly.

But he knew that she was still playing for position. He knew that if she would be frank he was destined to hear something gravely to his disadvantage. He wanted both to induce her to be frank and to prevent her from being frank.

"Which way?" she enquired.

"Behind you. Next door but two up the street. Funny we didn't run up against one another on the boat or the Paris train or somewhere."

"Yes."

"Because when I'm travelling by myself, which I hate, I always look through the train with a microscope for friends, or anyhow for someone I know; and its wonderful how often you do find someone

you know. But not today I didn't. I could have taken my oath there wasn't the slightest nodding acquaintance of mine in that train from Boulogne. And yet you were in it—unless of course there were two trains to Paris." He felt himself growing quite bright—she was having that effect on him.

"Ah!" said she, lifting a finger warningly, "nobody can ever be sure that anybody isn't in a train—I mean one of the big trains. And there weren't two Paris trains either."

Her manner, playfully mysterious, showed that she had humour, and he remembered noticing in her before, at their previous brief, few meetings, certain obscure indications of humour. Elaine had no humour, though she could often tell by wifely, loving instinct when he was being funny, and would smile in order to please him; but he was convinced that never in her life had Elaine really seen a joke. Jack had no humour. Jack would occasionally stare puzzled at his father and say: "Are you trying to be funny, Dad?"

He was suddenly drawn towards Pearl; he had the charming sensation of genuine intimacy with the exquisite strong creature. Strange! For he also went in fear of her. Beyond question Jack had chosen something worth choosing. But was Jack—a fine fellow in many ways—worthy of the choice he had made? A pretty doubt for a father! However, in these moments Alan was not a father, nor a father-in-law. He was just Pearl's appre-

ciative fellow-creature, and beginning to luxuriate in her society, in his discovery of her individuality.

They sat down side by side in his compartment. He observed with what elegant grace she disposed her body and limbs on the seat. Her first act was to take a transparent tortoiseshell cigarette-case out of her bag, and a cigarette out of the case. She did this very rapidly and neatly, with her gloves still on. Apparently smoking was her weakness—perhaps her sole weakness. He was quick with a match for her. She thanked him with a quiet smile, which flowered and faded all in an instant. Was she feeling sympathetic towards him, thinking of him as a fellow-creature? He was anxious to produce a good impression on her because she was a beautiful woman and because she was the sort of woman whose opinion he would necessarily value.

She enquired with politely eager cordiality about Elaine, whom she referred to as "Jack's mamma," not as "Mamma," and Alan said he was going out to join Jack's mamma, and she said of course he was, and Alan said he had spent a quiet and lonely Christmas, with golf and bridge in it, and she said that she and Jack had also been rather quiet. And then the conversation, insignificant, groping, cautious, slightly exacerbating to the nerves, dropped for a few seconds, which Pearl employed in leaning across to the heavy copper ash-tray and carefully dropping ash thereon.

"Heard about the railway accident, I suppose?" Alan resumed, in a new, livelier tone, as of a man

of the world who was aware of his duty not to go to sleep or to let her go to sleep.

"Yes," she said, gravely. "Bad, isn't it? My art-student told me. But aren't they always having accidents on that Bordeaux line?"

"Bordeaux?" he exclaimed, bewildered, shocked by a new and utterly unexpected orientation.

"Yes. She said it was near to Bordeaux."

"Oh!" he murmured, crestfallen, almost disappointed. "I heard it was somewhere down this line." He laughed; he could not help laughing.

"Well, I don't know. I only know what she told me." And Pearl laughed too.

"Perhaps there hasn't been any accident after all. You know how these rumours begin."

"Let's hope not," she said casually, with a faint sardonic gesture of the lips.

Yes, he liked her style. No nerves, no superstition, no nonsense about her. She would not have an iota of objection to travelling on a Friday even if Friday was dated the thirteenth of the month. Nor would she irrationally reason that accidents occur in twins, or triplets; nor that one accident could prevent another. A man could have peace with her, in the full assurance that she would not outrage his masculine commonsense. (But did she have peace with the flyaway Jack?)

She raised the lynx collar round her ears; her delicate face peeped out small through the enveloping fur.

"Yes," said Alan. "There's a devil of a draught

from that corridor window." And he jumped up and pulled the door to.

Now they were really alone together in the privacy of the compartment. She was a kind of celestial prisoner. He thought: "What a friend she could be!"

"Well," he said gaily, "how does my compartment strike you, Pearl?"

"It's just like any other compartment, isn't it? Who have you got for a room-mate?"

"Ah! That's the point. I haven't any room-mate."

"But how do you wangle it? . . . I forgot—the Sleeping-Car Company is your toy and your wash-pot. By the way, if you didn't find anybody you knew on the train, who were that remarkable old pair whose compartment you came out of when you nearly knocked me off the train?"

How sharp she was! And how agreeable her phrasing! How worldly! Worldliness, he decided, was the quality which best appealed to him. Wordsworth lessened in importance. Something naïve about Wordsworth.

"I just cottoned up to them in the Folkestone train, or rather the old man cottoned up to me. He knew me by name. But you must be interested in my compartment, my dear. I don't wangle it. I simply and expensively take two railway tickets and two berths. I can't see myself sharing a cell all night with a complete stranger—the idea's barbaric. And the Sleeping-Car Company is

barbaric. Of course they have their Train Bleu with a few single berths, and a fine fuss they make about it. As if all the Scotch expresses hadn't got single berths and had 'em for years and years!"

His eyes shone; he was on a pet topic—the barbarism of continental trains, the superiority of English trains to all others.

"So your exclusiveness costs you about a pound an hour, does it?" she smiled.

She had made the calculation with fair accuracy. And she was amusing. He had managed to warm her; she was unfolding petal by petal. Hence she must be thinking of him as a sympathetic fellow-creature. He was proud, complacent, youthful.

"And what if it does?" He stuck out his chin at her.

"I know someone who wouldn't approve," she said demurely.

"Oh?"

"Yes, Jack."

To Alan that single word was like a dulled, alarming report of an underground explosion, signifying a mysterious disaster. Something in her restrained, carefully calm tone, of suffering and resentment philosophically borne! But of course his first thought, as Jack's father and therefore bound to justify the boy in his own mind, was in defence of Jack. Jack would be right in disapproving. He, Alan, was becoming the weak victim of luxurious habits. Why should he refuse to accept conditions which were accepted by the

majority of even wealthy people? Travel was travel. A train could not be a hotel. A berth in a double-berthed compartment would be regarded as the unattainable height of comfort by millions and millions of decorous, respectable human beings not less sensitive and refined than himself. A few hours spent in the society of no matter what physically inoffensive man—what was it? Naught.

He had a superfluity of money, and he was squandering it on an inexcusable self-indulgence. Were his heart and brain in such a state that he could find no better use for riches? Were there not hospitals, educational schemes, the advancement of science? He was getting gross and ostentatious, after the style of a plutocrat who by chicane has made a fortune in a moment, and is too ignorant and coarse to employ it with decency. He was ashamed of his compartment. Jack would be right. But he could not instantly confess an error of taste to the beautiful, superior creature.

"Well," he said gently, persuadably. "Perhaps. Perhaps. But Jack does himself fairly well, I've noticed."

Jack had an untrammelled personal income of between four and five thousand a year, which had been left to him direct by a rich great-uncle (Alan's uncle): which money had been originally derived from the same source as Alan's—namely, the great Tyneside firm. Pearl's mother also was extremely rich, and gloriously generous to her adored daughter.

Indeed the two families were pretty well drowned in money, and their wealth appeared to be continually increasing. Money was always forcing itself upon them. The firm's profits rose yearly —good management! And Alan himself had received more than one mighty legacy from dead members of the opulent clan. They had to dispose somehow of their affluence, and they bestowed parts of it on Alan; and Alan in turn had to dispose of it somehow. So he had bought two railway tickets and two sleepers. What then? After all, the caprice was a trifle. His opinion of himself was improving again. Jack was always incalculable, and what Jack thought about any action of his father's was negligible.

"Yes," said Pearl. "Jack does do himself fairly well. But he'll soon have to be more careful."

"Why? Hasn't been speculating, has he?"

"Oh no! He's going to stand for Parliament. Labour, you know. Independent Labour Party, in fact."

And if, a minute earlier, her monosyllabic "Jack" had been like the sound of an underground explosion, this present announcement was like the loud, rending sound of an explosion visible, cataclysmic, shattering and tumbling down all splendid edifices in sight. The mere impact of it on his mind was frightful. Had he not from the first had an instinct that trouble had matured or was preparing to mature between Jack and Pearl? He had always blandly scoffed at instinct, especially the

celebrated feminine instinct. But how else explain the correctness of his prescience? Here the trouble was—and far more serious than any instinct could have foretold.

His first thought was one of sympathy for Pearl; his second, fury against Jack. She had married the boy in innocence, unsuspecting. For Jack, if an honest, was a most deceptive fellow. His demeanour, tranquil, quiet, reasonable, apparently open to argument, was constantly belied by his acts. Alan recalled in a flash a long series of Jack's intellectual pranks. He remembered that, though at sixteen an ardent pacifist, causing infinite unpleasantness at school, at seventeen Jack had suddenly turned bellicose and was for enlisting in the Air Force, under a false declaration of age, and becoming an "ace," to the undoing of all Boche pilots. The distressing and absurd episode had occurred during school-holidays, and had only been ended by fearful threats and even force. But everyone had secretly admired Jack's mad bravura in that particular affair. Impossible not to forgive him.

All Jack's eccentricities had been forgiven. At various times Alan had received discreet hints that he was apt to be too accommodating with Jack. But really the lad was too sincere, too pure-minded, too altruistic, too simple to merit the ruthless squashing which certain relatives had prescribed as the one proper treatment.

Now Alan clearly saw that he had been judging

Jack too favourably—no doubt from paternal partiality. He had forgiven, excused, justified. But not again! He comprehended at last that Jack's was precisely the character which he mistrusted more than any other in the world: the fanatic! His Jack, his own son, a fanatic! A bit startling, this news! He used the phrase to himself, with false lightness, essaying a private laugh, as if to persuade himself of his ability to meet any situation whatever wisely. But of course there was nothing to be done. Jack would not listen to pleading. Or rather, he would listen, and politely, thoughtfully; but no pleading would be effective. The situation could be met; it could be endured—with dignity and so on—but it could not be handled.

The news would resound throughout the continents. One day, soon, it would be the chief item on the front pages of newspapers. It would be in every mouth. A scion of the world-renowned firm of Frith, Walter & Co.—known familiarly as "Friths"—"gone red"! The thousands of employees would grin. The partners would look askance. The directors and heads of departments would look askance. The clerks would unconvincingly pretend that nothing on earth had happened. The official daily luncheons—such fine cooking!—on Tyneside, and at the London offices where Alan reigned, would be scenes of mourning.

Alan's influence in the firm had generally inclined towards generosity to the workmen, and indeed

the employees of no firm were treated better than Friths'. And here was the result of Alan's fatherhood! Alan would be to blame. Probably no one would blame him to his face; but unspoken blame would beat upon him. The thing was monstrous, fantastic and preposterous. It was unthinkable. Imagine Jack's wild speeches in the House, if he was elected—and he would be elected! The mighty controllers of Friths would tremble to open their newspapers of a morning.

He had been expecting to learn of some conjugal tiff between Pearl and his son, and instead he had heard of this appalling imminent event. It was the blow of his life. He was so shaken that he did not know how shaken he was. He entirely forgot about train-accidents and superstitions concerning train-accidents. A hundred victims killed or maimed was a bagatelle. And if accident succeeded accident, and the train in which he and Pearl and the Lucasses were travelling was smashed to pieces in a collision, that also would be a bagatelle. Nothing counted but the news.

There she sat, the bringer of the news, elegant to the last touch, a finished product of centuries of laborious civilisation. And she would be the chief sufferer by the event. She was the fanatic's wife, bound to him. Conceive her elegance dragged in the mud on Jack's capering pilgrimages! You couldn't conceive it. An outrage! She was holding herself with amazing dignity. He admired her beyond words. And he was melting with

sympathy for her. He wanted to comfort her. And who would dare to comfort her?

"I must say I'm surprised," he said quietly.

"You hadn't a notion of it, I suppose?"

"Not the slightest."

"Neither had I four days ago," said she.

Their glances admitted the full horror of the affair. Her glance was accusing his son, and Alan's glance was admitting the justice of the accusation.

"But he won't stay Labour," said Alan at a venture. Silly thing to say.

"No," said she, with the very faintest well-bred sneer as she took a fresh cigarette, "he'll be communist next." And it was of her own husband she was talking.

## CHAPTER X

## CATTLE

'HOW did you get this table?" enquired Pearl. "I tried for a table for two, for me and my artistic companion—she asked me to—over an hour ago, and they said there weren't any to be had. Bribery and corruption, I suppose?"

Her tone was playful and charming, but Alan detected a note of fundamental sociological criticism, and suggested to himself that despite her opposition to Jack's politics, Jack had been influencing her.

The roaring, shaking restaurant-car was full of passengers squeezing themselves into the narrow spaces between chairs and tables. Glasses and cutlery rattled ceaselessly together in the vibration of the train. A large fan swished its wings round and round in the centre of the roof, disturbing the stagnant, steam-heated air. A hundred advertisements, dehortations, exhortations, in a hundred colours, beset the eye on every side. Beyond the dark windows mysterious, dark, silent shapes swept by at terrific speed. Standing in perfect tranquillity at the platform of the Gare de Lyon, and seen from the platform, the restaurant-car had had

the appearance of a rich, heavenly refuge. Now it was transformed into an inferno, and there was no peace in it for the senses.

The passengers had been impatiently anticipating this release from the tedium and bondage of their compartments; they were excited by the prospect of food; and the moment of realisation was at hand. They were too eager to talk. They chafed; they crumbled bread; some of them cleaned their glasses and the prongs of their forks with napkins, and mutely displayed to neighbours the resulting black dust on the napkins. Wealthy, luxurious, and dominating though they were, they had to wait. They must eat together at the gesture of command, or not at all. They must eat exactly what was given them, or nothing. A balancing juggler, in the disguise of a waiter, appeared in the doorway with twelve cups of soup disposed in two tiers of six on a tray, and began to distribute them to the haughty travellers in the manner of mugs of tea to children at a school-treat, and the travellers looked up at the juggler and down at the cups, and were grateful. The repast had started.

Alan merely nodded in reply to Pearl's question, but he nodded with humour. He had come into the car ten minutes earlier and had been told that he could not have a table for two. Whereupon he had curtly summoned the head-waiter and given him a fifty-franc note. "You will be very amiable to occupy yourself a little with me. A table for two is necessary to me." The head-waiter had

stared at him for two seconds. "It is well, monsieur."

Anti-social, of course! Indefensible successful effort to gain an advantage at the expense of others by encouraging a man in dishonesty. Why had he wanted to sit alone with Pearl? Certainly not for his own pleasure, though he liked her company, or would have liked it had there been no family trouble to harass them. She had left his compartment immediately after her declaration that Jack would develop into a Communist, and no word had been said about meeting at dinner. The moment she had gone he had felt the need for long reflection. He would have preferred to leave their next encounter to the hazards of the journey; at any rate not to hasten it. But his silly conscience informed him that his duty was to lose no opportunity of seeing and hearing her, and to draw bravely all the sharp points of the family trouble to his sensitive breast; and that moreover Pearl was entitled to his escort in the train. And so, reluctant and yet eager for a martyrdom, he had secured the small table.

The complement of the car was made up by the arrival of two old people—Alan identified them in a mirror—Mr. and Mrs. Lucass. Heads were twisted to stare at them. They sat at the next small table but one behind Alan.

"Those your friends?" said Pearl, in a murmur.

"Acquaintances."

"Well, I've seen them before. In a hotel in Harrogate."

"Oh!" Alan concealed his knowledge of the fact.

"Yes."

"You know who they are, of course."

"I forget the name. Lucass, isn't it?"

"I'll whisper to you—*The* Lucasses. You know—old Lucass."

But the great name meant nothing to Pearl, who had never heard that old Lucass had once been the tyrant of Friths' greatest rival. Alan expressed surprise.

"But why *should* I have heard?" Pearl protested, with an indulgent smile. "Jack never mentions Friths."

"He wouldn't be where he is," said Alan quickly, "if there'd been no Friths—I can tell you that."

"But if this Mr. Lucass was such a swell," Pearl asked, "how is it you're making his acquaintance for the first time?"

She was cross-examining him, cornering him again; for an instant he was discountenanced.

"It's like this. He would never come to London. He always insisted that his Board should meet in Newcastle. And I was kept in London—never went to Newcastle. I wasn't even a director of Friths in those days. I did go to Newcastle once or twice, but I didn't come across him. A queer fellow. Still, now I know him I like him."

"I can't say anything about him," Pearl went on,

as if dismissing all that as being without interest for her. "But I can say something about her. She was hated in that hotel, a sort of laughing-stock and hated by everybody."

Alan's plumage was ruffled by this disparagement of his admired hag. Yet a few hours earlier his verdict on Mrs. Lucass had been harsh enough.

"How do you know she was hated by everybody, my dear?" he asked.

"I know because her room was over mine. You never heard such goings-on! Why! I could *hear* her—her voice, I mean, as well as her feet! And I don't believe she ever went to bed. I spoke to the chambermaid, and I soon saw that all the servants were full of her. Then I spoke to the manager, and he just hinted one or two things."

"Did you ever have any conversation with Mrs. Lucass herself?"

"I did not. We just left the hotel. Neither the manager nor anyone seemed to be able to do anything."

Alan glanced at Pearl's fine, firm face in search of the key to her individuality. He was in process of getting acquainted with her. The process had its undulations. At the moment she somewhat antagonised him by her hardness towards the old woman. She was in the full triumph of youth, charm, intelligence, beauty; there lay before her years and years of such triumph, which no difficulties with Jack could seriously impair: and yet she had no mercy for the old woman who in her turn had

once triumphed, and whose life lay behind her. Because of a disturbed night or two she nourished a prejudice against the old woman. A pity! Had Pearl never broken the sleep of a fellow-guest in a hotel?

But he must feel sorry also for Pearl; her youthfulness was somehow pathetic; her commonsense would perhaps be severely tried by Jack's political and other vagaries; he must not be hard on her; he wanted to soften everybody, and he must soften himself; his resentment against Jack was illogical. (Nevertheless he morbidly nourished it, as she nourished hers against the old hag.)

The waiter snatched up their soup-cups as though they had been in unlawful possession of them. Not a nice sympathetic waiter. But probably he was exasperated by the everlasting journeying between Paris and the frontier, and the contacts of the close kitchen, and the pricks of discipline, and the short, shaking nights, and the absence of home-life. In love, somewhere! Or a wife, somewhere! No doubt he could smile on a girl or spoil a child as well as anyone. Alan tried to think well of the waiter. The fish arrived, one fish, one complete animal, per person. Sailors had fished the animal now on his plate out of the wild winter sea. A flushed, perspiring cook had bent over it in the terrible heat of the stuffy kitchen. Wonderful! The wonder ought to kill all uncharitableness. How wistfully young was this Pearl in her conjugal quandary! She had fled from her

impossible Jack, after confiding to him her whole existence. And Jack?

"I tell you I must have some more wool!"

The voice was that of Mrs. Lucass, raised, clear, and precariously cajoling. Precariously, because it might at any moment change to the threatening. Alan and Pearl could hear plainly every word. Mrs. Lucass had finished her wool, and demanded more, and insisted on more. Evidently she was working herself up towards a nervous crisis. The supply of wool was in one of her registered trunks in the luggage-van. Yes, she ought to have taken more in her bag. No need for anybody to tell her that. But she could not think of everything. However, she simply must have wool for the sleepless night. The matter was quite simple. All *he*, her husband, had to do was to get hold of the guard and go to the van and have the trunk opened. It was a wardrobe trunk, and the wool was in the second drawer from the top. Simplicity itself. A tip would do the trick. It was her trunk; it belonged to her; surely she had the right to open it, wherever it was. But men were so queer. They always foresaw difficulties; they loved to foresee difficulties. Come now . . . as soon as dinner was over . . . He could ascertain from the head-waiter where the guard might be found.

Well, and what if the trunk *was* under a lot of other trunks? The other trunks could be moved. The guard had nothing else to do. What was there silly or unheard-of in the idea? The idea stood to

reason. Nobody had the right to touch registered luggage till the end of the journey? How absurd! No right to touch your own trunk? It might be a question of life and death; and what then? Must people be allowed to die because their luggage was registered? A pretty state of affairs! Men were insane. They were like infants. They were perfectly ridiculous.

Half the car had cocked its ears at this outrage on the Anglo-Saxon social law which forbids the raising of the voice, or the display of any marital discord, in a public place. But Mrs. Lucass was in a mood to flout all codes, to affront the attention of the entire world; she was giving an exhibition which far exceeded her performances in the Folkestone train. As for old Mr. Lucass, he was defending his exposed position in the fewest words and in the lowest tone. An unforeseeable calamity had overtaken him, for which he could blame none but the gods; he was too courageous, too chivalrous, to rise and leave the car.

Pearl's faint, ironic smile seemed to be saying pityingly to Alan: "Didn't I tell you what sort of a woman she was? Now you can see for yourself." Alan had a sense of the tragedy of the hag's life. She had been young. Vestiges of youth still remained in the variety of her tone and in the vivacity of her gestures as he watched them in the mirror. He could discern the surviving girl in her. And she had nothing now to live for but wool, and wool lacked. Her case crystallised and illustrated

the sorrowful curse of the human race: the flight of time, of beauty, and of faculties.

"She's had some dreadful operations, and her nerves are gone," Alan apologised for her to Pearl in a whisper.

But Pearl's glance was not mollified.

"And what about my grandchildren?" the hag exclaimed shrilly. "My daughters are all over the earth—I had Sally's letter from Rio the day before yesterday, and well you know what was in it, and now I'm stopped from knitting for the chicks! And all because——" She stopped and wiped her eyes with an absurd atom of a handkerchief.

She knew she was demanding what the old man could not give. She knew her arguments were preposterous. She knew the old man was being cruelly ill-treated. But her conscience and her feeling for decency were strangled in the frightful grip of the forces of reaction against the shock of the report of the accident. She was not the criminal; nature was the criminal, and she the victim. Strange person, Alan! While thinking these thoughts, he was also thinking: "She knows I came on the train alone. She's sure to have seen me here with Pearl at this table. What'll she have to say about it afterwards? She's no idea Pearl's my son's wife. But of course she has. She must recognise her. I'm not thinking clearly. Only if she recognises Pearl, as she has done, then she'll wonder why I didn't tell her Pearl was on this journey. She'll think I was hiding it and imagine all sorts of things. . . . It

seems to me I go out and look for worries. As if I hadn't got enough with Jack's capers! What the devil does it matter what the old girl thinks, or how much she makes a spectacle of herself? I'm sorry for Lucass, but he married her. I haven't married her."

And then Alan's mood changed back to the humane as his mind dwelt on the hag's daughters all over the earth. In conversation with him she had not made the slightest allusion to her children. He had not been aware that she had any children. (Of course they were daughters; were they sons one or two of them would certainly have been implanted in the great firm.) She knew the tremendous experience of becoming a mother and of watching over the growth of children. And her children were scattered all over the earth; and they too had had the tremendous experience of becoming mothers. And now she was knitting for the children of her children. She was not knitting, as he had superiorly imagined, for the sake of knitting; but with a dutiful purpose. She wanted wool out of the registered trunk for a benevolent end.

And here was the beautiful, proud Pearl disdaining her, mercilessly pitying her with a scarce perceptible curl of lovely lips. Pearl was naught in comparison with her. She knew a million times more of life than Pearl knew, and, perhaps, than Pearl would ever know. Pearl was an ingenuous neophyte. The hag was a grandmother with

vitality enough left after her frightful physical ordeals to behave like a girl and a pampered mistress to her old husband.

The train swerved violently, swaying human bodies. Everyone thought of the railway accident, and had qualms about the imminence of another accident. The train slowed down, approaching the suburbs of some city. Then a yellow illumination was seen, growing stronger. A shunting-yard. A flare. Many parallel lines of rail visible in the light of the flare. The flare, as it swam with strange deliberation past the train, was unusual in character, and the vision of its large, capriciously rising, smoke-emitting flame excited the whole car. Fragments of flame detached themselves from it, lived apart in the air for a fraction of a second, and expired. Another flare!

An American in the restaurant-car cried:

"The accident! That's the accident, sure!"

The constraint and uneasiness, and also the vulgar, unspoken or muttered jeers, originating in Mrs. Lucass's terrible performance, passed away and died instantaneously. All the diners, except those at the row of small tables, which were on the side nearest the flares, stood up and crowded towards the side. The number of occupants of the car seemed suddenly to be doubled. Mrs. Lucass herself became an occupant like any other occupant; and without ceremony people crushed against her and the old man, bending heads to see under the tops of windows; they had to steady themselves on

the unreliable floor by clutching at racks, tables, and shoulders. The rigid, timed ritual of the meal ceased to be, and was utterly forgotten.

"See that crane! That's a crane!" cried another voice.

The gigantic, black, uplifted arm of a crane did indeed show unmistakably against the varying yellow light. Then a coach of some sort, lying on its roof, the wheels sticking up absurdly like the legs of a shot animal that had rolled over in death. Then more coaches, not upset, but ranged in a higgledy-piggledy procession off their rails, and a locomotive at the end similarly immobilised. Steam wisping from the locomotive. Men running to and fro. The faint noise of shouts heard through the thick glass. And other noises, inhuman, inexplicable, frightening.

"See! That must be corpses! There! *There!*" Fingers indicated objects hidden under a tarpaulin.

If the force of man's volition should have stopped the train, it would have stopped. But the train ran unheedfully on, inexorable as fate. Then another jolt, more violent than the first! Men and women clung desperately to one another in new alarm. There were two short, shrill screams in the car, from women; they were unnoticed.

"There's another! That must be a doctor kneeling! Perhaps it isn't a corpse. Perhaps it's only somebody injured."

No one could be sure of anything thus seen obscurely, across the width of the shunting-yard,

through the dirty glass of the moving car in the fitfully lit night. The entire formidable nocturnal spectacle glided backwards to the rear of the train. It would not stop. It was gone. A few men rushed out of the car in the hope of seeing it afresh from the doors of the platform.

A tremendous chatter of raised voices in the car! Many people could now give precise, detailed accounts of what they had seen and heard: but no two of them were agreed as to what they had seen. Each had seen a different sight. Some sat down; the majority, however, recoiled from the anti-climax of sitting-down. They counted corpses to one another. They explained to one another exactly how the accident must have happened. A man here had positively seen three coaches wrong side up. A woman there would take oath that there were two locomotives funnel to funnel.

"My God! My God!"

Some quietly wept. Some wiped perspiration from their faces. Some grinned self-consciously. A man said with a titter:

"Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." And laughed. "Come along, waiter!" he called.

The other passengers turned and saw the waiter, whose presence they had ignored or forgotten. Question after question was shot at him, in English or in French. He was young and extremely pale; with both hands he clutched at the open door leading to the kitchen. He tried to speak and failed; his mouth worked, but words would not

issue from it. The ventilating fan continued to swish round and round with the indifference of a god.

In a few moments the train, more and more dilatory, crept as it were stealthily into a station, and came to rest with a jerk. The station was vast and absolutely calm,—indeed deserted save for a black-frocked woman fussing with newspapers at a bookstall on a far platform, and a couple of distant porters whose inattention to the arrival seemed to be complete. The passengers were conscious that they were in the great Rome Express; but the great Rome Express passed every night through the station, and the station, weary, thought nothing of it. The passengers had just had a very disturbing emotional experience, but the station apparently recked not of collisions, overturned coaches, cranes, doctors, the dead and the injured lying beneath flares in the winter night. The contrast between the atmosphere of the station and that of the shunting-yard close by was shocking by its mere dramatic quality.

The engine made periodic noises like the difficult breathing of some leviathan beast, and these noises echoed portentously in the vastness of the enclosure. Two young girls in uniform sprang up out of nothing—also a truck, laden with comestibles and beverages. One of them pushed the truck like a lad, her back nearly horizontal. They were chattering and laughing to each other, too interested in their gossip to give any heed to the train.

The restaurant-car began to empty, and immediately excited groups of passengers were seen on the platform below the train. Alan saw an enormous sign, "Laroche."

"Laroche," he said to Pearl, and looked at his watch. "We must be half an hour late already. I don't know how."

"No," said Pearl. "We haven't stopped much. It's wonderful how they manage to get late."

These were the first words either of them had spoken since the spectacle in the shunting-yard. And they were still in their seats at the table. Alan was of northern stock by his father and southern by his mother. Pearl, according to Alan's vague information, came from the north. Whatever was northern had shown itself in both of them during the passage through the shunting-yard. Alan had noticed no sign of emotion in Pearl's demeanour, unless sitting rigidly tight was a sign. Each of them had in fact been largely occupied in deploring the behaviour of their fellow creatures under stress. "She is hard," thought Alan, "she is hard. She is surely capable of being very hard." He regretted this quality in her, which had already been illustrated in her attitude towards Mrs. Lucass. She might well be marvellous in a crisis; but could she be sympathetic, could she melt in tenderness, could her soul go out to a soul? He felt sorry for Jack, who needed sympathy if he was to be happy.

Still they did not speak of what they had seen. They could not express themselves about it with-

out a sort of shamefaced self-consciousness; therefore they avoided the subject, and spent breath on perfunctory talk concerning the unpunctuality of trains! Northern! They were enchanted in an inhibitory spell. Alan broke it by suddenly standing up. He turned round to survey the car. Mrs. Lucass, the ornaments on her hat nodding, was disappearing through the door, the old man following. Only three other passengers remained, and they were silent, motionless, as if at a loss how to comport themselves. The car was quiet, no vibration, no movement, no rumbling, no tinkle of glass and crockery. The car might have been fixed immovable in the foundations of the earth, have never moved, be destined never to move.

The calm was disturbed by the entrance of the head-waiter, twisting his horse-hair black moustaches. The head-waiter was angry, and his anger fell on two waiters, including the pale, frightened young man, who came in after him. He was angry because the service of his dinner had been interrupted and deranged. He asked the subordinates what they meant by such vagaries. He ordered them to proceed with the service, to clear away the plates, to behave in short as though nothing had happened. He was so assertive of his authority as to prove that he secretly doubted whether he possessed it.

Alan put a question to him. He glared at Alan, and quailed, and then tried to inflate himself.

Accident? What accident? Victims? He knew of no accident. Stay, he had indeed heard of some accident, but a long way down the line. The shunting-yard, the field of manœuvres? Through which the train had run? Ah, *that*! No, that was not an accident. (He glanced about uneasily to see if the subordinates were watching him.) That was only a shunting accident. Not an accident, thus to say. (The railway-employee mentality all over again! Non-committal nescience! The same in every part of the earth wherever trains ran on lines!) He knew little, but one had informed him that it was a case of some cattle-trucks and an error of points. Yes, no doubt a collision. A derailment of certain trucks and waggons. Yes, perhaps a violent shock. But no victims. Assuredly no victims. Some cattle killed—possibly. Some, he had been told, were still in the trucks. One had heard them. Regrettable, but veritably nothing. And he could not comprehend the alarm of the passengers. He could have wished that all the other passengers had held themselves as tranquil as Monsieur and Madame. In fine, the dinner. It was necessary to continue the dinner. . . . He ended by being quite human and friendly. Had Monsieur commanded anything to drink?

The passengers one by one returned into the car, sheepishly. Somehow they had become acquainted with the real facts.

"I always thought those things couldn't be passenger-coaches."

"But it was so difficult to see properly, and the train moving all the time too."

"Pity about the cattle."

Pearl murmured two words to Alan, who had resumed his hat:

"Mob psychology."

And such disdain in her eyes!

"Yes, my girl," thought Alan. "You're right enough now. But you thought it was the big accident. And so did I. But we're so careful of appearances. We're stuck up, you and I are. Spiritual pride again."

In the revulsion he was moved to order champagne.

There was a series of sharp raps on the pane, and a man's hand with a silver coin in it showed just over the crimson cloth that was stretched along the lower part of all the windows, perhaps to mitigate the cold which emanates from every window in winter. Alan looked. Old Mr. Lucass was down below on the platform. His rugged face seemed urgently to summon help. Alan hurried out of the car and jumped down on to the bleak, blusterous platform. A whistle sounded. The conductors of the different cars were preparing to embark, but they had no appearance of caring whether or not passengers were left behind. Mrs. Lucass stood forlorn a few yards away.

"She's got out and she won't get in," said Mr. Lucass grimly, hastening to his wife.

Alan joined them. The hag's hat was awry,

and the refreshment girls were giggling at the odd sight of it.

"I won't go on," Mrs. Lucass protested savagely as the men closed on her. "I can't stand any more of these accidents."

Nor would she have gone on, had she had to deal with the old man alone; for she was once more on the edge of the hysterical. But Alan intimidated her. Moreover, even in the nervous crisis, she wanted to conserve his sympathetic admiration for her, which she had first discerned in the tea-car of the Paris train. Vanity helped her uncertain hand to straighten the hat.

"Now Mrs. Lucass," said Alan brightly. "We shan't be able to do without you on this journey."

One at each shoulder the men cajoled and forced her to the steps of the restaurant-car, and pushed her, all ungainly and hag-like and expostulating, up into the car. At the same instant the train, as insidiously as the first stirring of a passion, began to move. They were all three aboard.

"Come and finish your dinner, my lass," said the old man, cheerful in relief.

A voice said:

"She won't care to go back into the restaurant-car now. Let me take you to your compartment, Mrs. Lucass. I know where it is. You two gentlemen can go and eat. We shall manage."

It was Pearl, capable, grim, with a hint of calm sympathy in her modulated, clear tones. She did not wait for an answer. She led the hag down the

corridor away from the restaurant-car, guiding her, steering her. Her very back showed to the men that men were not desirable.

"Considering all she's said and looked about the old lady," Alan reflected, "Pearl's done rather a fine thing. I didn't think she had it in her."

He watched the two women down the corridor. The sight of them touched him, so beaten and clumsy and finished was the elder, and so young, kindly and helpful was the younger. He turned quickly to the door with what the Anglo-Saxon characteristically euphemises as a "funny feeling in the throat." He leaned out from the doorway and gazed at the station receding in its vast totality. The faces of the refreshment-girls were now undecipherable in the distance. His heart was uplifted because he had seen something beautiful and surprising.

"A damn near shave, that!" the old man muttered.

## CHAPTER XI

## AFTER CLOSING-TIME

A STRANGE and perhaps a moving sight —Alan and old Mr. Lucass seated alone together in the restaurant-car, back to back, Mr. Lucass facing the direction of the train, Alan facing the mirror at the rear-end of the car; ignoring one another, each apparently absorbed in the careful conduct of a high-class cigar; Mr. Lucass with features grimly set, Alan's younger features more mobile and more urbane! The mutual disregard of the two friendly acquaintances after an afflicting episode had seemed less odd while the car was full of diners; now that everyone but themselves had gone it began to embarrass Alan, if not Mr. Lucass. But Alan could not stir—even to turn his head, and he felt that the reserved Mr. Lucass was even more deeply than himself under the spell of a situation which had become immovably static.

The train had once more escaped from all geographical relativity. It was going from nowhere to nowhere; it existed separate in space; nothing could be discerned through the dark windows except the reflected image of the bright, shaking car. The great ventilating fan had lost its god-like quality,

and hung still, dead. Little by little the car had been depopulated. An attendant had vended cigars and cigarettes; a higher attendant had been round writing and dropping bills; his superior had been round with a zinc cash-tray and taken money and given change and expressed grateful thanks for tips, and vanished. The other diners had vanished, slowly, with reluctance, toward the horrors of night in the compartments.

And Alan sat, and Mr. Lucass sat. Waiters had cleared all the tables, save theirs, of cutlery, flowers and cloths. Waiters had looked in at the door and gazed resentfully at the men who by their obstinacy were disturbing the order of the universe of the car. The head-waiter had entered the car, and glanced with respectful enquiry at his patron, Alan; and Alan had met his hard black eyes firmly.

"Not finished here," said Alan to him. "Madame . . . ."

And the head-waiter had retired.

As for Mr. Lucass, he was covered by Alan's firmness. The head-waiter, who knew everything, knew that the old man was somehow connected with Alan. Two wavy pillars of smoke rose. The train maintained its roaring rush from nowhere to nowhere.

Then, in the mirror, Alan saw the door open behind him. Pearl's figure showed in the doorway, blonde, colour of oatmeal, commanding, yet so young. She looked beckoningly at old Mr. Lucass, who stiffly got up, and squeezed himself

out of the narrow space between chair and table, then hesitated and abandoned to an ash-tray with regret his half-smoked cigar. Pearl held the door open till he could seize it. She went away again, first. He followed. The door swung to. Old Mr. Lucass had been summoned to his inferno-paradise in the compartment two coaches off. He was obeying the summons.

Alan sat absolutely alone in the restaurant-car. His mind had gradually been leaving the Lucass pair and closing upon the Jack-Pearl problem. Now it ran after Mr. Lucass along the corridors, but only for a few moments. Was Pearl going to bed without finishing her dinner, without saying a word to her waiting father-in-law? Why had she made no sign to him? Terrible indeed was the prospect before a martyrised father-in-law, father of a mad incalculable son! Of what use was philosophy to conjure a son's communism or a daughter-in-law's implacable judgment upon the communist? . . . No, not a communist yet. He, Alan, would keep his head. Wordsworth? Not a syllable in Wordsworth, he would wager, to help him to regard Jack's unspeakable political apostasy with the charity of heaven. Poor Pearl! Poor——! She would come back into the restaurant-car. Superior, calm, formidable as she was, with her faint ironic smile, she would surely come back. She came back.

"Everything all right out there now?" Alan asked as she sat down. She infinitesimally shrugged

her shoulders, and smiled with a measured, half-pitying tolerance.

"Yes, let's hope so." Beautiful tone of voice, but the articulation perhaps over-clear, over-precise.

Strange that after her good deed she should not be more compassionate. When Alan had helped people he always thereby became their champion and defender. Still, she had done the good deep.

"Everybody seems to be gone," she said. "How nice it is, isn't it? I should have come straight in here before, but I thought I'd better persuade my artistic companion to go to bed first. Then she'd be out of the way." More fluted tolerance.

Alan felt afraid for Jack.

"Yes," said he to himself, "but that wasn't the only thing you went back for. You've powdered yourself and you've scented yourself a bit."

Well, he was flattered by this proof of regard for his approval. She had to be at her best even for a father-in-law. But he could not feel towards her as, it seemed to him, a father-in-law ought to feel. Conceivably in the world of her ideals there were no fathers-in-law nor daughters-in-laws —only men and women. . . . A charming, yet practical, train hat she wore.

"Now what will you have?" he enquired. "Let's see—where were you in your dinner?" He had rung the bell, which was not answered.

"They've taken everything away," she said, surprised, critical. "I'll have some fruit. No, nothing else. I never eat much in trains."

"Sure?"

"Quite, thanks."

"Well," he murmured, having waited for an answer to the bell, and then rose and went quickly into the other half of the car where all the food and drink came from.

A waiter was asleep across a table, his face hidden in the crook of an elbow. The head-waiter was seated at another table, writing figures on what appeared to be a very complicated form. The head-waiter looked up questioningly, at once defiant and intimidated. He had the air of saying that for a tip of fifty francs you could not fairly expect the whole earth.

"Some fruit, please." A pause.

"Certainly, sir."

"Immediately."

"But yes, sir." The man glanced at the sleeping waiter, but dared not stretch his authority far enough to give him an order at such an hour; authority had limits. He got up himself.

"They're bringing it," said Alan, in secret triumph, rejoining Pearl.

"And some flowers," said the waiter, with a professional, ingratiating, odious smile, arriving rapidly with cutlery and plate and a basket of fruit in one hand and a flower-vase in the other. Clever fellow! By a gratuitous attention which cost him naught he was bidding for a higher tip the next morning at breakfast.

"But why did they take everything away?" said

Pearl, still critical, and not in the slightest degree impressed by the realisation of fruit and flowers after closing-time.

"I'm afraid you don't understand what a wonderful thing I've done for you, my girl," said Alan to himself.

But only in the privacy of his mind was he thus censorious of her. Outwardly he seemed to be apologetic. He could not assume the powerful, easy male. She somehow cowed him. He was the apostate Jack's father. And anxious though he was to discuss fully with Pearl the Jack problem, he feared to begin. He simply could not begin. He was like a nervous lad.

"How nice to be all alone here!" said she, skinning a banana.

"Yes," he agreed; and to himself: "And not every man on this train could have arranged it for you —no, not by a damned sight!"

Then she said suddenly:

"Let's talk about Jack."

She had directness, courage, audacity. She had sent the curtain up with a rush. The fearful Alan was acutely apprehensive of drama.

## CHAPTER XII

# THE RING

"WELL," said Alan, "where shall we begin?"

"Give me a match, will you?"

She was feeling for her cigarette-case in the bag which she had laid on the table. In the midst of eating the banana she would smoke! Alan did not like it. She was certainly a cigarette fiend. Imagine living with a woman who smoked cigarettes all the time! He liked women to smoke, but he did not like women who were, or were becoming, the slaves of a mania. The male maniac he could more comfortably tolerate, and forgive. He wanted women to be purer: a preference which possibly had survived from the lost habit of putting women on a pedestal above the rough pit where men so coarsely indulged themselves. He observed, however, that though she used no holder Pearl's fingers were unstained by nicotine. No doubt a particular instance of her general efficiency.

"You must get through quite a few cigarettes a day," he said, quizzing her. "Five or six a day at least."

"Quite."

"Can you smoke any cigarette? I think I heard you couldn't."

"I cannot. I can only smoke my own. I get them in the City; that shop—you must know it——"

"Then how do you manage when you're abroad?" He gave her a lighted match.

"As well as I can."

"But the customs?"

"I have trouble sometimes with the customs. Had today."

"Oh?"

"I told the man I'd got twenty, and he asked me to show them—they always do—and there were thirty-six. Oh! I had to pay. He made me pay all right. I used to think you could take in anything under a hundred. But they won't have that now. Oh no! And they're awful with women travelling alone."

"So they ought to be. That's only because they've learnt by experience. I honestly believe you're all smugglers. And where's the point of it? Considering the risks! At this rate you'll have finished your thirty-six by breakfast tomorrow."

"I know I shall. But I had another two hundred at the bottom of my valise."

"But supposing he'd found them?"

"But he didn't. He'd had enough with the thirty-six. I knew he would have. It's so easy to do them in if you go the right way about it. I've never been caught yet."

"Well, I give you up."

She had lied; she had cheated the Republic; she had robbed the Republican tax-payer! And she made nothing of it! Indeed she calmly and cynically exulted. The enigma of the universe was woman, the intact survivor of the Stone Age, uncivilisable, unalterable. He compassionated Jack, himself, every man on earth. But he did not confess to Pearl that he had seen her in trouble with the custom officers, and had left her to it.

"Now where *shall* we begin?"

Elated by moral superiority, he replied lightly:

"At the beginning of course. Are you fond of him, my dear?"

"Jack? Do you mean, am I in love with him? Do I love him?" She paused. "Yes, I expect I do."

She was disconcertingly frank. Alan had employed the vague formula "fond of him," because he found the phrase "love him" embarrassing to utter. But she had no such foolish false shame in discovering her feelings to him. Women were like that. There she sat, exquisite, with a banana in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and smoke issuing from her beautiful nostrils! (She inhaled, the suicidal miscreant!) She loved Jack. That was something. He was conscious of relief. Love, if it was genuine, would in the end resolve all difficulties.

"That's something," he said, and could not conceal his relief.

She said quietly, with her terrible distinctness:

"It isn't everything."

And now his sudden satisfaction was impaired.

"His mother and I have never heard just how you two came together."

"Very simple. Jack's so kind. He's so *nice*. And when he smiles at you he's irresistible. And his eyes! He didn't get those from you, did he?"

"I suppose not." Alan flushed slightly.

"And then he's so straight. So honest."

Alan nodded, not without constraint, trying not to seem as if he took the credit for having made the marvellously kind and honest Jack.

"But his conscience!" Pearl continued. "His conscience! It's his conscience. His conscience is awful."

"He got *that* from me anyway," Alan observed grimly.

"Well, if he did I'm sorry. If you don't mind my saying so,"—a mere perfunctory politeness on her part; the scandalising girl would say anything without a quiver—"nobody ought to have a conscience like Jack's. His conscience will spoil his life, and it would spoil mine if I'd let it. It's the most frightful tyrant you can imagine. It's morbid. It pokes its nose into everything, that's what it does. If you give your conscience a free hand as he does, you're ruined. A conscience ought to be kept in its place. There *are* limits."

Alan thought:

"She's showing off a bit, but she's talking hard sense. The mischief is that I agree with her

entirely, only I mustn't show it too plainly. I haven't noticed the lad's conscience as much as she has; but I've noticed it, and I can feel that what she says is absolutely true. Heavens! She's no ordinary girl. She gives me the shivers in the small of my back."

He was afraid of her: she had such poise. The poise was displayed even more in her tone than in what she said. And he was afraid for Jack too. Never would Jack be equal to her; he would go down before her. Jack had chosen well, but he had chosen too well. Yet how lovely she looked! With what elegance, with what distinction, she accomplished the double deed, so barbaric, of eating a banana, and smoking a cigarette simultaneously! He fumbled about in his mind for something effective to say, and found it not. There was a brief silence. She gazed at him; and how serene was her gaze!

"Of course," she said, "I'm speaking quite frankly——"

"Oh, of course. You must say whatever you like to me. Forget I'm his father."

"I was only going to say this. Jack's cruel." Alan opened his mouth, but with a gesture she shut it for him. "Yes, yes. I know I said he's kind. So he is, in one way. But he's frightfully cruel too. That's his conscience. He's got no conscience so far as I or anybody else is concerned: I mean any individual. His conscience tells him he has a duty to the community. But if doing his

duty to the community means—means—well, a tragedy for me, he'll do it all the same. He won't consider me for a moment. His duty to me won't count. He can't even see it. He'd cheerfully sacrifice me to the community—not really to the community, but to his own peace of mind. Because that's what it is—his own peace of mind. Rank selfishness! But they're all the same."

"Who are all the same?"

"Fanatics."

Alan had not foreseen the word. The worst was that in this appalling indictment of her husband—yes, her husband, to whom she had been married hardly a year!—she did not raise her voice; she was shockingly tranquil, letting escape no hint of emotion. To counter her, Alan smoked his cigar with all the scrupulous nicety which a fine cigar deserves.

"I must say, my dear, I think you're being perhaps a shade unjust."

"Well, if I am I'm sorry. But I honestly can't see it myself. Where am I unjust? I want to know. I'm dying to know."

Alan noticed suddenly that she was not wearing her wedding ring. In spite of himself he was aghast. He thought: "She isn't showing poise there, anyhow." She wore only one ring—a circlet of brilliants set in platinum—and on the third finger of her left hand. He stared at the sinister symbol of disaster.

"What are you looking at?" she asked. "My ring?"

"Where's your wedding-ring?"

"Why! This is it!"

"But you weren't married like that."

"No. I wasn't. Because I didn't choose the first ring myself. But while we were on our honeymoon I got Jack to buy me this one instead. Surely you know that gold wedding-rings are quite out of fashion?"

"I didn't, my dear," said Alan, rather softly, as he recovered his self-possession.

"Well, you *are* behind the times!"

"I'm afraid I am," he meekly admitted.

And indeed he thought how aged he must be, and how blind in his senility to the phenomena of the new age. He did not like the amazing innovation. Right wedding rings had always been of solid gold and unornamented, and they ought to continue always to be of solid gold and unornamented. Still, he was greatly relieved. This was his second relief during the interview.

"Yes," Pearl went on. "These new rings have been worn for quite some time now. I am surprised you didn't know. A plain gold ring makes you seem so *married*."

"Good God!" thought Alan. But he hid the sentiment away.

## CHAPTER XIII

## PEARL'S DECISION

"NOW about my unpleasant theory of your being a shade unjust," said Alan with a new, bright, sympathetic smile.

After all she was so young, so pathetically sure of herself, so wistfully dignified, so beautiful with her soft, straw-coloured hair under the hat—he must give homage to her qualities, but he must lift himself above her. "If Jack's convinced what his career ought to be, do you suggest he should give it up because of you? I only want to know. I'm not criticising."

"Now, look here," she replied, responding instantly to the advance of his mood, leaning forward into closer intimacy, annihilating the table between them, breaking into a sad smile far transcending in sweetness Alan's own. Alan was unaware that his smile had enchanted her, that she thought he was perfectly adorable. He was startled and enthralled by the sudden revelation of a charm in her which he had not suspected. He was in the old, wooing Jack's place for a moment. "Now look here—what a heavenly cigar! I love the smell of cigars and men's tweed caps—you say,

'If Jack's convinced what his career ought to be.' Jack oughtn't to be convinced. It's absurd. By all means let him stand for Parliaments. But let him stay Tory. He'd do much more good like that than by going Red. He'd have more influence, heaps more. And he wouldn't be laughed at. If he joins Labour he's bound to alter all his way of living. He must. He won't even be able to wear the same clothes. And look at the people he'd have to hobnob with, and the way they talk—yes, and eat! I've seen one or two. I hate politics."

"Politics are the most important thing in the world, my dear."

"I daresay they are. But I hate them."

"I don't."

"If you don't hate them, why aren't you in them?"

"Not my line."

"Much more your line than Jack's. Because you've got a hundred times more sense than he has. I admire Jack's character frightfully—in some ways, but he simply doesn't know what the world is. Hasn't a notion of it. Never will have, if you ask me. He thinks the Labour Party's the only honest party. Can you conceive it! All political parties are dishonest. I admit they have to be, even if they didn't want to be. But they *do* want to be. And the Labour Party's the most dishonest of all. Read their newspapers — that's enough. Oh! I've looked into it. I thought I ought to, and I did. Not that I'm frightened by a bit of dishonesty. I'm not. Jack won't see dishonesty, though. He

*is* frightened of it. No! What I object to is the silliness of the scheme. I'm talking frankly. Jack has a terrific idea of you. He worships you. And I'm sure you're very fond of him, and I don't want to hurt your feelings. But I must say what I think, mustn't I?" Alan nodded, with a fresh, reassuring, appreciative smile. "It's the silliness of the scheme—that's what I say. I say there's nothing worse than looking ridiculous in the eyes of commonsense people. Nothing worse! I couldn't ever forgive it. And I should be so ashamed! Jack picnicking about in the Labour Party—it would be worse than slumming, and slumming is the most disgusting thing ever invented. A man like Jack going Labour—why, it's against nature! Surely you can try to improve the country without making a perfect spectacle of yourself! Having these conceited democrats to tea in some private room of a cheap restaurant because it wouldn't be nice to have them at your hotel, or in your home. And putting on your oldest clothes for them. And flattering them. And all the time you aren't being yourselves either. And the elections! Canvassing. Smoothing them over. Shaking hands and being jolly. I say it's against nature, and I loathe it—even if I agreed with their views, which I don't. It's horrible. Don't you agree, don't you agree, don't you agree?"

Alan laughed, as naturally as he could.

"I agree that slumming's the most disgusting thing ever invented," he said. "But it seems to me

we're off the point. If Jack's seriously convinced about what he ought to do—what then? Is he to give it up? Do you say that? The point isn't whether he's right or wrong. It's whether he should give up doing what he thinks he ought to do. Now what do you say?" He had made his voice very tender.

Pearl had finished the banana, and, though it was hardly more than half-smoked, she crushed the cigarette into the heavy ash-tray.

"I couldn't bear it," she murmured, but still very distinctly, after clearing her throat rather self-consciously.

Alan felt that he had her cornered; he was sorry for her. He went on, gently pursuing his triumph:

"And I may tell you you've got it all wrong. Those fellows would love to see you, both of you, in your finest clothes, and drive with you in your motor, and eat with you in the very best hotels there are, or in your flat or your house when you've got one. They're just as human as anybody else, and as fond of luxury. And neither more nor less honest than anybody else. They'd love it—so *that* needn't trouble you, my dear."

"Then they oughtn't to love it!" Pearl exclaimed almost passionately.

"Possibly not. But they would."

"They want to upset everything, and it wouldn't do any good. If it would, I might think differently. But it wouldn't. Everybody would be worse off, and they'd be the worst off of all. It isn't

as if they aren't better off now than ever they were before. It isn't as if things weren't improving for them. I've been reading the Hammonds' books. Jack told me about them, and I thought I ought to read them, and I have done. And that's more than Jack's done—he never reads any book all through. So I do know something about it."

"Quite. But, my dear, you haven't answered the question. Do you say, or don't you, that he ought to give up his scheme because you object to it and it would be dreadful for you? . . . *I* don't like his scheme any more than you do yourself."

She stirred on her chair, leaned back a little, away from Alan.

"I couldn't bear it. I should be so ashamed."

Her tone was faltering, and yet somehow utterly obstinate. Alan saw a marvel: the creation in her eyes of two dew-drops, diamonds, gems. They hung perilously in the inner corners of her eyes, beautiful. They exquisitely glittered, catching the rays of the electric-lamps. Of what use her loveliness, her charm, her remarkable intelligence, her powder, her paint, her circlet of brilliants, her chic? The deep, incurable sadness of the universe had seized her, bowed her down. But she would not yield. She ignored the danger in her eyes; she would not attempt to hide it. She held the gems, swimming, by force of will, and looked straight at Alan, who was moved as much as she. Again the inexplicable, touching pathos of the car, of the whole train rushing and grinding along in

the darkness from nowhere to nowhere, wrung his heart. And Pearl's courage in thus fronting him intensified the torture. And the memory of her unexpected kindliness towards the hag-beauty whom she detested, intensified it still further. He thought of Wordsworth. He *was* Wordsworth, mute, drenched in the heavenly melancholy wonder of life. He spoke to Pearl with the extremest tenderness.

"But can't you persuade him to change his plans?"

Pearl shook her head fretfully.

The swarthy head-waiter appeared suddenly at the door. He said nothing, but his enquiring, protesting glance said:

"You must go. The power of your tip is exhausted."

"*C'est bien. On s'en va,*" Alan threw at him with commanding impatience.

The head-waiter retreated. Alan turned instantly to Pearl, by whom seemingly the interruption had not been even noticed:

"No. I'm afraid nobody could persuade the boy to change his plans," said Pearl.

(The boy worshipped his father, she had said: touching!)

"Then what, my dear?"

Pearl said:

"I shall leave him. . . . Let's go."

Then only did she dab her eyes with a handkerchief.

## CHAPTER XIV

## PEARL'S KISS

THEY walked together along the train, Pearl in front. She seemed to be perfectly composed. It was not late, by time, but by sensation it might have been the deepest middle of the night. The blinds of the narrow corridors were all drawn. The doors of the compartments were all shut. Nobody was about, not even a chocolate-clad attendant. The electric lights gleamed in vain with tireless continuance in the curved ceilings of the corridors. The variegated shining maps displayed in vain all the sleeping-car routes of Europe and Asia, and all the names of the legended cities through which they passed. The shaking, clattering linked platforms between the coaches, with their striped curtains which so flimsily hid the glimpses of the world that the train was for ever leaving behind and for ever rushing to meet, were deserted, precarious bridges over hell. There was a profound nocturnal silence and stillness in the midst of the deafening eternal racket and motion.

But the unseen guardians of the train were watchful. A small red light burned its signal at the end of a corridor. In a glass-covered box

on a wall could be seen tools ready for life-saving use in case of accident. On the attendant's seat at the same end of the corridor lay a bag and a portfolio of yellow and salmon-tinted forms; also an official cap.

Alan's fancy tore down the doors of the compartments and saw the searchers after pleasure and the fugitives from themselves lying in bunk above bunk in slumber or sleepless. His fancy flew forward to the engine and saw the driver and stoker in the glow of the fiery furnace peering forth into the blast from the flanks of the terrific monster which they tended. The whole organism of the flying procession had an aura of touching, intolerable pathos. Yet despite his own woe, he could clearly divine and appreciate its mysterious, ridiculous beauty.

He was exceedingly sad. He was affronted and hurt. He had a frightful grievance against Pearl, for whom nevertheless his sympathy was acute. She surely wouldn't "leave" Jack! A conjugal scandal in his most respectable family, and on the top of the political scandal! The thought was appalling; it was nearly unthinkable. Pearl might be desperately driven, but she was wrong; she was mad, cruelly selfish. A wife could not leave her husband because he happened to have a political conscience and the moral force to obey it. Such heartless follies were simply not committed by decent people. Pearl had taken Jack for better for worse, and she could not properly abandon him

at the first serious strain upon their relations. If she did, the phrase "for better for worse" had no meaning. But she would do it. And Jack would let her do it. Neither would surrender. Jack was wrong in one way but right in another. And equally —yes, he could not deny it—Pearl might justify herself. She could furnish an impressive argument, and should the argument fail, she could fall back on the unanswerable and final, "I can't." If she couldn't tolerate the coming situation she couldn't. The separation would be the queerest that ever was, and not one acquaintance in a hundred would be capable of estimating it fairly. . . . Elaine! Strange, but true: Alan had not till that moment thought of the reaction of the disaster upon his wife. A reflection upon her lack of character and her lack of importance in his world! He had not remembered that Elaine too would suffer. At the journey's end he would meet Elaine and he would have to tell her the calamitous news, at the earliest opportunity. "Come here, my girl," he would have to say, in a matter-of-fact yet grave tone, "I want to talk to you. Something's happened."

Anyhow Elaine would receive the news calmly. But, though she would hate Jack's new politics, she would without a doubt take Jack's side, and in her nice, friendly softness, she would be absolutely implacable against Pearl, and much pained if Alan said a single word in favour of Pearl. Nothing would move her, and Alan would have to live with

her. Alan's judgment condemned Pearl, and yet he would be Pearl's only champion. From whatever angle he surveyed the problem, it presented itself as malignant, mortifying and insoluble. It was the sort of problem that no perspicuity could foresee and no caution provide against. A conjugal separation in the family! Why, a divorce might follow—it would follow!

"I say," said Alan, when they had reached the door of his compartment. "You aren't quite fit to go to bed straight off. Come and sit in here for a minute or two."

He opened the door and turned on the light. The interior looked quite inviting, with two books and a bottle of Evian and a glass on the table, his crimson dressing-gown hung from a hook, and pale, fluffy, wool-lined slippers under it, and the whiteness of the sheet showing its border beneath the red-and-blue striped blanket. Everywhere brass and mahogany glittered, and everywhere was tidiness. After nine o'clock at night, when both berths of a compartment are taken, it is impossible to sit down on the lower berth because of the interference of the upper berth, but here the upper berth was still concealed in the wall, and the lower one was comfortably available as a sofa. Pearl silently, even meekly, went in.

"Squeeze yourself in there," said Alan, lifting a strapped rug from the small seat on the side of the table opposite the bed.

Pearl obeyed. Alan, sitting on the bed near to

the window, faced her. He had closed the door. Pearl, nervous, examined her face in a hand-mirror, and apparently found it satisfactory, for she did nothing to it.

"Have a cigarette?" Alan put on an air of brisk cheerfulness.

"No thanks."

"What? Not a cigarette?"

"No. I've been thinking over what you said."

"About smoking?" He had a slight hope that she was referring to the question which he had asked her to answer concerning Jack.

"Yes."

He was a little disappointed, but renewed with an effort his cheerfulness.

"Then you must have some Evian."

He poured out the water, holding the glass in his hand so that the swaying of the train should not spill it; and she drank. She seemed to be strangely submissive, and grateful too for his protectiveness.

He was shut up with the young, independent, tortured, tragic creature in the tiny cubicle, separated with her from the whole earth. Her eyes were fixed on the glass, which she still held. He gazed at her averted face. It had kindness, firmness, sorrow, rectitude, pride. But it was impenetrable, baffling, enigmatic; he could not read it; it was a rampart, and her mind lay hidden and protected behind it. He was not with her; he was alone; he was always alone; he was never with

anybody; everybody was always alone. Somehow his grief seemed less important than Pearl's. He could withstand no matter what; but she was so defenceless in her confident, half-imperious pride, she who was about to render herself solitary in the world. He was melting with the heat of a desire to save her from herself and from fate.

"You know," he said compassionately, "you really ought to think again. You can't give up Jack like that. You couldn't do it, my dear."

Silence. The skirts of the crimson dressing-gown trembled and swung as if on a small ship in a smooth sea. Pearl picked up her bag from the table, and squeezed herself out of the corner. Not a word. She tried to smile, nearly smiled, and failed. Then she impulsively, impetuously, seized Alan's hand, bent, kissed it, and dropped it —all before he could make a movement.

"I couldn't bear it. It's no use. I could never bear it. I must go. Good night."

She escaped. But the next moment there was a tap on the door, which opened sufficiently for her to put in her head.

"It isn't as if the marriage-tie was so sacred as all that in these days," she remarked calmly, and departed again.

## CHAPTER XV

## THE ESCAPE

AFTER Alan had been in bed some time, sleepless and without inclination to sleep, painfully and yet voluptuously abandoned to meditation upon disaster and upon the mutability of existence, the train stopped. Where it had stopped, why it had stopped, he could not divine. In the ceiling of the compartment glowed the mauve light, which a thoughtful, ingenious Sleeping Car Company had provided for the timid as a compromise between total darkness and blinding glare. It had a beautiful soft tint, soothing to the nerves and favourable to melancholy; it shed romance even upon a little pile of underlinen and hosiery.

"What does it matter to me where we are?" he reflected in grim despair, as a man might reflect in the sure knowledge that he was sentenced to be hung the next morning. He heard some object slip down between the bed and the wall. He surmised that it must be the Wordsworth which he had been trying, with ignominious lack of success, to read for the steadying of his soul amid the storms of life.

"Let the damned thing go!" he reflected negli-

gently. Then he heard strange and violent noises, trampings, bumpings, and expostulations in the corridor.

"No regard for other people—of course!" he reflected cynically. "Wake up everybody in the carriage—if anybody was asleep: which is doubtful. But there are some who could sleep through the Last Trump. It's not me, though."

Silence. He strained to hear the next noise, because there was always on such occasions a next noise. But silence. The suspense aggrieved him as much as a noise or as the loss of all his fortune and all the members of his family. His grievances were gigantic in the night; they sprang full grown into enormity one after another, and this last one was the highest. His sense of proportion was awry, and he knew it, but he fiercely loved it to be awry and would not on any account have had it altered.

"I may as well see where we are," he reflected savagely, and turned on the bed-lamp. His watch, hung on a brass-hook to the wall by the bed, said twenty-five minutes past eleven. He accused the innocent thing of sloth, and pressed it against his ear. It was faithfully ticking. He sighed. He would have guessed the hour to be 2 or 3 a.m.

"We must have passed Dijon," he reflected.

He seemed to remember a halt at Dijon, but all recent events exterior to the train were very vague in his mind. He sat up and reached for the purple-covered Sleeping Car Guide, could not find the

page giving Service No. 27, cursed, found it, could not decipher the figures without his eye-glasses, cursed, searched vainly beneath the pillow for his eye-glasses, cursed, found them. "Dijon. 10:11. Impossible. Something wrong." He cursed again. His behaviour was puerile, contemptible, and he knew it; but he gloried in it, ferociously hating moderation, commonsense, self-control. At length he understood that he had been looking at the itinerary of the return train.

"Why can't they give clearer indications? Ah! Dijon. Arrive 21:30. Depart 21:37. Yes. We've passed Dijon. Unless we're two hours late. Must be half-way between Dijon and Aix-les-Bains. But perhaps we are two hours late. You never know on these awful French lines. Different thing from the Scotch expresses, these French so-called trains-de-luxe! . . . Couldn't be two hours late. Don't remember any delays. All the same we were decidedly late at Laroche, and there hadn't been any delays up to there. But everything's possible. Supposing she *is* two hours late. I'd better look out of the window. No! Dashed if I will! What do I care?"

But the uncertainty fretted him, wore down his factitious obstinacy. He sprawled along the bed, and, lying on his stomach, fumbled with the blind of the window, and after more pitiable profanity, coaxed it to shoot up, and wiped the glass clear with the sleeve of his pyjamas. What he saw first was raindrops on the grimy pane, and then a low,

small platform dotted with tiny pools of rain. It had been raining, but was raining no longer. A trifling, negligible station. One lamp burning forlornly on the platform. No name on the lamp! No name anywhere to be seen! The sole word which he could descry was "Lampisterie," over a shabby door. Why in the name of incalculable caprice should the majestic Rome Express, of which the Sleeping Car Company made such a fuss in their conceited advertisements, choose to stop at a miserable village station? He gave up attempting to sound the depths of the idiocy of trains and traffic-managers.

Then Alan's ear caught more and still more violent sounds in the corridor—not of bodies but of voices; they receded, died away. Within a few seconds a figure stumbled on the platform, splashing careless feet into the little fresh-formed pools. It was Mrs. Lucass descending from the carriage, apparently without aid. She came to a standstill, and remained absolutely motionless, her face towards the word "Lampisterie," and her amorphous back towards the train.

In an instant Alan's interest shot up in a flame. Something was happening to somebody else, not to him. With eagerness he welcomed the distraction, exulted in it, enjoyed it. He knew that old Mr. Lucass was in trouble, perhaps driven past the limit of endurance and ready to commit homicide; but he had no feeling for Mr. Lucass; his feelings were solely those of the callous spectator savouring

with avidity the emotions furnished by a performance to which otherwise he was heartlessly indifferent. The thing was a godsend to his ennui, weariness and distress. He kicked his bare feet on the bed and pressed closer to the cold glass in order to miss nothing. He was glad to be undressed; if he had been dressed, his inconvenient conscience (that conscience which in a still more inconvenient form he had transmitted to Jack) would probably have forced him out on to the midnight platform to join in the episode.

He easily reconstructed events in their sequence. The hag-beauty had tried to escape from the train at Laroche, and been foiled. She had quite possibly made another effort at Dijon, and again been foiled. And now the chance stopping of the express at this desolate, damp platform without a name, had given her a third opportunity, for which she must have been in wait. She was fully clothed in outdoor wear; she was even very warmly wrapped up, and carried a rug on her arm. Therefore she had refused to go to bed. Therefore old Mr. Lucass had not gone to bed. Alan imagined them, the hag-beauty probably sitting obstinate and silent on the small seat by the table, and Mr. Lucass lying all dressed on the lower berth, hoping grimly to exhaust her energy. At any rate he had not sat, because there would not have been room for his head under the upper berth. There they had remained, hour after hour, struggling against each other without moving and without speech—for

nagging and bickering could not continue for ever.

Then the train had stopped. The hag-beauty had not cared where the stoppage was, nor for how long it would stop. She knew one thing—it had stopped and she might be able to escape from it. She was victimised by her nerves, obsessed utterly by the idea of the peril of the train doomed by the presage of her nerves to disaster. Mr. Lucass must have opposed her exit from the compartment, not by force, for he could not decently lay hands on her. She had reached the corridor, and then the old man's patience had at last given out; he had seized her; he had perhaps lost his temper. The noise of their encounter had frightened the respectability in both of them; the encounter had ceased—and, at another effort towards escape by the hag-beauty, been resumed. The hag-beauty was then so roused, so fiercely inspired by her nerves, that she had become reckless of noise and of bad impressions on neighbouring respectabilities. She had fought her way to the platform of the carriage. Mr. Lucass, cowed, and fearful of the signs of uncontrolled hysteria, had desisted from opposition. He was bound to desist. She had managed to unfasten the double latches of the carriage door; she had opened it, seen the tempting freedom of the platform, and jumped down in all her heavy ungainliness.

And there she was, dominated by a single thought, waiting for the train to leave her behind!

The train might start at any moment. Alan could see neither signal nor railwayman, nor any human being in all France except the hag-beauty. The episode must end very shortly; it could not be protracted. How would it end? Alan felt his heart beating with excited apprehension.

Then Mr. Lucass appeared on the platform. Mr. Lucass too had jumped down in a last desperate hope of exorcising the devil in his wife. From the windows and doors of the train no spectator of the scene was leaning forth. Probably not one was looking at it through a window. And train-attendants were as invisible as policemen in a street row. Old Mr. Lucass, with a muffler about his neck and an overcoat loose on his shoulders, walked firmly across the platform to the hag-beauty, and touched her on the shoulder. She did not budge. He went round her and faced her. Alan could see from his lips and gestures that he was talking. The hag-beauty turned her back to him, and thus Alan had a sight of her face. She was smiling to herself, a most sinister smile—so far as Alan could judge in the gloom. She tapped her foot on the asphalt of the platform. Her head-gear seemed to tremble. Mr. Lucass did not cease talking, and the hag-beauty did not cease her ignoring smile at the train. Alan heard a faint distant whistle, the warning of the engine. Then he heard a call from someone unseen who must have been standing on the platform of the carriage. Mr. Lucass ran beneath the voice—

yes, the old man ran; but he did not board the train. The train moved—a movement scarcely perceptible—but it moved. It was going, going; the station, the word "Lampisterie," the hag-beauty, began to glide backwards. The Lucass pair were being left on the platform of a nameless station; they were being marooned in the dead of night, without the least morsel of luggage save the rug on the hag-beauty's arm. No light of any dwelling was anywhere visible from the deserting train. The village—the place could not be more than a village—might be a couple of kilometres off, five kilometres off; such distances between houses and stations were common enough in France.

"What a dirty shame!" thought Alan, blaming the woman and commiserating the man.

Then something flew from the train a few yards ahead of Alan, and a suitcase fell endways on the platform and bounced up again with the elasticity of a ball, and came to rest flat over a pool. Then another suitcase, which opened in falling and also came to rest flat, having first strewn the platform with its contents. Then a despatch-case, a rug, an umbrella, hat boxes and a stick, which danced and turned somersaults in quite an amusing style. Then a man's hat. These matters sprawled along fifteen or twenty yards of platform. Evidently an attendant had arisen from somewhere in the train, and old Mr. Lucass, resourceful to the last though horribly beaten, had asked him to throw the whole of the Lucass possessions out of the window of the

compartment, and he was obeying the instructions with gusto. Naught else for a few seconds, and then finally sailed out a white collar, which the wind played with, and an unresilient lump with no bounce in it whatever, which Alan surmised to be Mrs. Lucass's knitting-bag. This concluding item dropped into earth beyond the edge of the platform. (But the registered luggage must be still on the train.) The speed of the train ruthlessly increased.

A fortunate curve of the track enabled Alan to get a parting transient glimpse of two vague, dark figures, both bending towards the ground, tiny and far off. The train straightened its momentary sinuosity. The Lucass pair were irrecoverably gone, vanished, cut off for ever from the comity of the train, abandoned to desolation.

## CHAPTER XVI

## AIX-LES-BAINS

NO sleep of course! Alan was reconciled to that. At any rate he certainly had a bed, whereas old Lucass might not see bed for another twenty-four hours. How could he, Alan, go off to sleep, even in ideal conditions of silence and stillness, after witnessing the dreadful comic scene which he had witnessed? Nohow! He had two sensations, familiar to those of similar temperament who have been gravely perturbed in the night. Pride in the resigned decision to bear his cross cheerfully: and joy in the contemplation of a beautiful packet of time which, as it were, fate had suddenly presented to him. He possessed his wits, some ease of body, a mind not yet conscious of fatigue, and several unexpected hours—rich leisure for the most minute operations.

First of all he rearranged the contents of the compartment with a view to the visit of the customs at Modane at 4 a.m., and also with a view to dressing himself at the greatest possible speed the next morning. He decided that he would shave himself during the halt at Turin, 7.50 a.m. A full ten minutes, and he could shave in five minutes.

Then, the compartment having been put in the desired order, he perpended upon what he should do next. There was nothing to do—except read Wordsworth, and he had no fancy to read Wordsworth. Wordsworth so far had not been equal to the occasions of the day. However, here was an opportunity for self-discipline. He had begun to read *The Prelude*. It was his duty to continue reading it. He would continue reading it. Having fished up the book, he did continue reading it —in bed, and in the crimson dressing-gown so that his restless arms might be free without the risk of chill.

And *The Prelude* was refractory to him. He conned and conned, and got naught for his efforts —no uplifted mood of charity, nobility, solemn bliss. There was a wall between the verse and his brain. He yawned. The beautiful packet of spare time was swiftly transformed into a heavy pall of pure ennui, which gladly he would have given away but could find no donee. He was bored, bored, bored—bored, bored, bored. He chanted under his breath a rhythmic repetition of the word to accompany the periodicity of the wheels of the train on the metals. The prospect of several hours of this inactive insomnia was terrible to him. Here was the man, the poet, the philosopher who scarcely a dozen hours earlier had not a care in the world, and to whom nevertheless in the meantime nothing worse than a vague menace had happened!

A tap on the door.

"Come in," he answered, wearily and perfunctorily, as if he had been expecting a tap for hours and had grown tired of waiting for it. He thought the car-attendant had forgotten to tell him something important about the customs and was repairing the omission by a visit at an inexcusable hour. The devoted attendant ought to be reproved, and should be. Nevertheless Alan was very pleased with the prospect of any distraction whatever.

The door-knob moved.

"Oh!" Alan put his arm out of bed and undid the safety-bolt. "Come in. Come in."

"Can I?"

It was Pearl's head that appeared as the door was cautiously opened. She was dressed as completely as when she had left him.

"Damn the girl!" thought Alan, whose temper had gradually changed in the night to the peevish. "Why isn't she in bed? Why do women always want to start talking when they ought to be asleep?" (Elaine, if she had a positive fault, showed a certain tendency that way.)

But he said aloud, with extreme sweetness:

"My dear, come in. Come in. What's happened to you to stop you getting to bed—all this time, too?"

"They've gone!" said Pearl.

"Who've gone?" Alan asked, although of course he knew quite well whom she meant: sign of his suppressed peevishness.

"Those Lucasses. They've——"

"Oh, them! Yes, I saw them, through the window."

"So did I."

"Ah, you did? Well, they've gone."

Had Pearl, he asked himself sardonically, come to rouse him up simply because she had found that she could not rest until she had imparted to him the strange news?

"But why? Like that?" said Pearl. "I suppose it was Mrs. Lucass's doing. I never saw such a thing in all my life."

"Neither did I."

"But why did she——"

"She said nothing to you while you were looking after her in the middle of dinner?"

"Not about that. She scarcely spoke."

"Well, I'll tell you why they went like that," said Alan. "They went because her ladyship had got into her head that this train was dangerous. She was afraid of an accident, and she worked herself up until she was jolly well sure there *will* be an accident. You know how women are, my dear." Alan was strangely breezy.

"Yes, I do. Especially a woman like her. But really she must be mad. That's the only excuse for her. If she's sane she deserves to be smacked. It's inconceivable, that's what it is." Indignation in her clear voice. "I *did* feel so sorry for Mr. Lucass." Sympathy in her clear voice. "I hope there won't be an accident," she added, half negligently.

The last remark somewhat startled Alan, who had a transient conception of the train as a doomed entity which the seer in Mrs. Lucass had left to its fate.

"Yes," he agreed vaguely and meditatively, answering nothing in particular, or everything, of what Pearl had said.

"I say——" She paused. She had shut the door and was leaning against it, in a charming pose.

"They think out the curve of every finger. They always know exactly how they look," reflected Alan, who in order to see Pearl face to face had had to turn on his left side.

The ceiling-light was extinguished; the bed-light made shadows everywhere in the compartment except on the bed. Pearl did beyond question look extraordinarily lovely, extraordinarily elegant in the shadowed corner by the door.

She proceeded after the brief pause:

"Do you suppose I could have their compartment? It's empty. Nobody's using it."

Alan became more and more sardonic. Mrs. Lucass had informed him that she was a woman and a man too—she, the most hysterically feminine creature ever born. (Such were the words that Alan used in his mind.) And now Pearl, the masculinity of whose intelligence he had been foolishly admiring—Pearl was getting feminine also. The Lucasses' compartment was empty by pure hazard. Had the Lucasses not abandoned the train, she would have contented herself with a

companion in her own compartment, made the best of things, and been well enough the next morning. But because the other compartment happened to be empty, she wanted to upset the entire train, put him, Alan, to a devil of a lot of bother, and deprive a car-attendant of some of his only too-short ration of sleep! The fellow, already disturbed once, would have to be about and alert again at Aix-les-Bains before one-thirty. Such a caprice was perfectly rotten. (Again, Alan's vocabulary in his private mind.) But he replied aloud, with a benignant smile and a tone to match:

"My dear! Of course! What a good scheme! I'll see to it for you. I'll get up and fix it. I expect you found it a bit uncomfortable in there with your artistic friend." And thus he misled Pearl with complete success as to his attitude towards her.

"You are a dear," she murmured appreciatively.

"I'm not at all a dear—far from it," he said to himself savagely. "All I think is it's a bit odd that a woman who's decided to leave her husband should make a fuss about a compartment. What's it matter whether you sleep or not? You're going to leave your husband."

"The fact is," Pearl went on, speaking lower as she opened the door, "my artistic companion is rather offensive. Would you believe it, she hadn't begun to undress when I went in there after I'd left you, though she'd said she would at once. She was writing in her notebook. She'd taken the top

berth without asking me, and she was writing up there all sprawling on her stomach. I didn't complain; but of course I had to let her see. . . . I couldn't bear to watch her undress, so I looked out of the window, and that was how I came to see the Lucasses."

"The usual thing," Alan reflected malevolently. "Two women thrown together—fight like cats. I bet they've had the deuce of a shindy." And aloud: "You run along and I'll fix the conductor. He's certain to be about because we're getting on for Aix-les-Bains now. What's the number of your wigwam? Sixth carriage isn't it in? Yes."

As soon as Pearl had departed, he lit a cigarette.

"Curse all women!" he exclaimed softly and religiously. "Anyhow she wasn't smoking—for a wonder!" Withal, his attitude towards the female sex in general, and in particular to Pearl, did not convince even himself; for beneath his irritation and resentment was continuously the memory: she had kissed his hand.

In the "flitting," as they called it on Tyneside, the getting out of the old compartment and the getting into the new one, she was delicious to Alan, and delicious to the attendant. The attendant was her slave, and he was also the slave of Alan. But in her deliciousness Pearl was exacting too. She let nothing go by in the execution of her wishes; she was undoubtedly fussy. After every trifle had been carried into the ex-home of the Lucasses and the attendant was offering subtle, respectful

hints of his real opinion of Mrs. Lucass as a traveller, Pearl said suddenly:

"I think I'll have that upper berth strapped back so it won't be in my way." The attendant recoiled, for the upper berth was now strewn with Pearl's possessions.

"Will you really?" Alan asked, a mild protest in his voice. From the corridor he was watching the manœuvres, quite shameless in his crimson dressing-gown.

The feeling of the two men was plain enough; but Pearl ignored it.

"Oh, I think so," she insisted, very blandly.

She was obeyed. The attendant climbed on to the lower seat, and Pearl charmingly received articles at his hands. Then he stripped the upper bed, and soon a pile of bed-linen lay in the corridor. Then he puffed and struggled with the straps, and at last the whole deed was accomplished. He gave a most urbane and chivalrous Gallic bow, and, stopping in the corridor, picked up the bed-linen in his hands grimy with train-dirt.

"Thank you so very much—a thousand times," said Pearl, beginning in English and finishing in French, with a smile in fullest discharge of her obligation to the exhausted man. And she lit a cigarette and surveyed the field of her triumph.

"Well, that's about all, my dear," said Alan. "I'll leave you."

"You have been good," said she. "I know I'm a dreadful nuisance."

He moved to leave her, and at the very moment the train slackened speed. The din and the vibration were reduced.

"By Jove!" thought Alan. "Aix-les-Bains already! Then it must be nearly half-past one. No use going to bed till we're out of the place."

He released a blind in the corridor and looked forth. Pearl came and stood by his side. The train ran slowly into the big, echoing station, which tens of thousands of de luxe winter travellers, asleep or weary with insomnia, had passed through without even seeing it. No traveller emerged from any compartment. Within the arcana of the compartments travellers were asking themselves sleepily: "Where are we now? This train seems to be always stopping." The train was at rest, silent, taking breath. And the station platforms appeared to be as lifeless as the carriage and the entire train. Only a huge clock was alive.

"One twenty-eight," Alan observed. "Four minutes late. Not so bad."

No one seemed to be leaving the train, no one entering it. As usual, at these nocturnal halts, not an official was visible. Then Alan and Pearl saw a man in a shabby blouse, not a railway porter, crossing a track towards the train. He carried a rather unwieldy suitcase, and kept glancing over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. He was indeed being followed.

"That's Jack," said Pearl, with a self-conscious laugh.

"But how could Jack be here?" Alan asked quietly, emulating his daughter-in-law's self-possession.

"Well," she answered, "there's only one way, isn't there?"

As the two men approached the train she tapped violently on the window. Her voice was under better control than her hand.

## CHAPTER XVII

# THE EMBRACE

AT the startling spectacle of his son and only child, whom he had not seen since the marriage, Alan was suddenly inspired by an immense paternal pride. Jack seemed not to be changed in any particular, yet Alan beheld him with fresh, new eyes, as though beholding him as he really was for the first time.

Jack was within a few days of his twenty-fifth birthday: tall, slim, elegant both in body and in his sober, simple, costly tourist attire; a firm, confident tread; his head unconsciously held high; the gaze of his grey eyes direct, straightforward and calm; a pleasant, ingenuous, honest look on his thin, rather pale, meditative face.

Though he had been uncompromisingly critical of his school, Jack wore a school necktie, and by this Alan was specially affected, for he too was entitled to carry a similar coloured rag, which for its wearers symbolised centuries of a unique tradition—at least father and son passionately regarded the tradition as unique.

The lad had a remarkably youthful air—more youthful than his wife's—and Alan could detect

the mere boy in him, but at the same time he was curiously mature in Alan's sight.

Alan thought in naïve wonder:

"Can this grown fellow, self-possessed, determined, and with a complete philosophy of life and serious intentions upon the evolution of society —can he be my son and Elaine's?"

Yes, he was immensely proud, and he could not master his pride. Jack was a miracle.

But also Alan was frightened, he was positively intimidated, by the apprehension of the immediate future. He perceived coming inevitably together two tremendous individual forces, neither of which he could control. He foresaw a clash, a collision, a terrible interlocking, with most distressing consequences of all sorts. He compassionated his son and his son's wife, but wanted to remove himself, as a fragile, defenceless thing, from their dangerous vicinity. He wished intensely that he had been travelling a day earlier or a day later.

Pearl had decided to desert this paragon of style and honour? Monstrous! Inconceivable!

The girl stood hesitant, quite still, smiling vaguely, awaiting whatever might happen to her, perhaps marshalling her numerous wits for the impact. The moment was thrilling.

Jack gave a blue French note to the man, took the suitcase himself, pushed further open the platform door of the carriage, and pitched the suitcase inside. In a second, in the tenth of a second, in an impossibly short space of time, he was in the corridor,

his head somewhere near the ceiling, his sharp, prominent chin sticking out in front of him.

He saw nothing but Pearl, who turned to face him under the electric lights of the corridor. He was pleasantly smiling. He pulled off his cap, one of those tweed caps the smell of which Pearl had classed with the odour of a fine cigar. He did not say a word. He simply advanced upon Pearl, steadily smiling. He might have been going to kill her in cold blood, or to embrace her. She stood like a victim till he was over her, and then she stiffened into a defensive opposition which he either ignored or did not notice. He put his long arms round her neck; they encircled her almost twice, so that his hands in their pale loose gloves nearly met under her chin. She was helpless. She could not move her head. She must meet his glance—or she must close her eyes. She did not close her eyes. He had travelled like lightning to catch her, and he had caught her. She was his, even in her passive opposition. He kissed her on the lips—a sustained kiss, powerful, ardent and pure. He seemed to feel no constraint, no self-consciousness; he was performing a natural act. He was aware of nothing but her. His gaze burned its way into the secrecies of her thought. Young love, victorious!

To Alan, as he watched, the nature and fierceness and simplicity of young love were revealed. He reflected: "Did I once love like that? Is it possible that once I was so young?" And he realised,

as never before, that he was old. But the realisation did not sadden him with regrets. He was content to be tranquil and to appreciate in another the ecstasy which he could no more achieve.

"Leave him?" he reflected. "The idea is absurd! She couldn't do it. No woman could give up such a man!"

And he was glad. He felt again that the trouble between Jack and Pearl would resolve itself, and that all his worrying had been utterly unnecessary. What Pearl had said to him had no significance. Only the embrace had significance; it was the final answer to every argument.

And Alan thought also:

"What an exquisite, lovely vision I have seen!" His eyes were just a little moist at the vision. "It is the loveliest vision I have ever seen!"

Then Jack loosed his captive as simply and naturally as he had enfolded her. Jack was assuaged.

"You'd better get out here," he said cheerfully. "I didn't hope to find you all up and dressed. I expected I should have to stand in the corridor till morning. Come on. We'll stop here at Aix, my darling." He was apparently sure of her acquiescence. He took everything for granted. He had taken for granted that he would meet the train, and that she would be in the train; and now he was taking for granted that at his urgency she would leave the train. His decisions were instantaneous.

Pearl shook her head.

"Yes. Come on. Train will be off in a moment. Never mind your things."

Standing precisely at the door of her new compartment, Pearl opened the door, vanished into the fortress, and shut the door. The snap of the inner catch was heard. Jack turned the outer knob, but the door would not yield.

## CHAPTER XVIII

## THE FEAT

"I SAY," said Alan, in a voice as matter-of-fact as he could command. He had been standing, in the crimson dressing-gown, in the doorway of his compartment, two doors from Pearl's, and Jack, absorbed, had not even noticed the figure of his father—rather absurd with the ends of the legs finished off in trailing pyjamas and red slippers. The lad was extremely puzzled; then, as he realised the identity of the summoner, very suspicious.

"Come along in here," said Alan.

"Are you in this show, Dad?" Jack asked abruptly, inimically, when he was inside the compartment, and Alan had shut the door.

The door swung open again, unobserved by the two men; but it mattered not whether the door was open or closed; the corridor was empty, the train asleep; the halt at Aix-les-Bains, the incident of Jack's irruption, were nothing whatever to the train in its wandering, swift pilgrimage across the vast lands of the Republic.

"Sit down," said Alan, seating himself. "No! I'm not in 'this show.' I'm going to your mother, as I expect she told you. Sheer accident, Pearl

being in the same train." He gave a few details.

"Well I'm dashed! I *am* dashed! . . . She told you anything?" Jack questioned, his candid face softening as he acquitted his father of any complicity against him, and as his astonishment at finding his father wore off.

"Well, she's told me a bit. I understand enough."

Jack looked at him. There was a constraint between them, natural in the circumstances. Jack was not now his son, and Alan was not Jack's father. Jack was a completely independent human being, monopolised by the sole thought of his own interests, harassed but self-confident, not in the least anxious for advice or help; and Alan was merely another man, influenced by the caution and the timidity with which any wise man approaches a fellow-creature whom he knows to be in grave and subtle difficulties.

"Why are you here like this—if one may enquire?" Alan added.

"I wanted to catch her before she reached her mother."

"You knew she was going to her mother, then?"

"I didn't exactly know. But she did just mention that she might go and see her mother."

"When was that? When you told her about your—new scheme?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"Yesterday morning."

A silence.

"Now my boy," said Alan gently, beginning to feel his fathership a little, "it won't do you any harm to be perfectly frank with me. Say anything you like. I shan't mind, and of course I won't repeat it." He touched the lad's shoulder by his side. "What sort of a person is Mrs. Meadowes? I hardly know her."

"Oh! She's all right I suppose," Jack replied indifferently. "But Pearl listens to her—and of course the old lady would be—er—against me in this affair."

"Yes. But why did Pearl think of going to her mother all of a sudden?"

"It was when I told her definitely I should stand for Labour."

"She was upset?"

"Not for a minute or two, because I'd talked of it before. But she soon got herself upset."

"Very?"

"Yes, I suppose you'd say very upset."

"More than you thought she'd be?"

"By Jove, yes! She must have been knocked about considerably, because she went off last night without telling me. I was out for dinner, on business, and when I got back she'd gone. I only found out by a telegram she'd left lying around."

"What was the telegram about? I'm only asking because I ought to know exactly where we all are."

"Yes. That's quite all right, Dad. It was only

a telegram from the Italian State Railways in Waterloo Place about a berth on this train."

"You were a trifle startled?"

"You bet I was, Dad!" Jack was diminishing to the naïveté of a boyish son.

A tremor of the floor of the compartment. Alan glanced at the window. The station was passing by with furtive, creeping deliberation. The door of the compartment moved, hesitated, and banged into the doorway. Alan latched it securely. Silence and stillness were broken; din and clatter gradually resumed; cold air invaded the compartment from the window.

"We're off!" Jack exclaimed.

"Yes."

It was as if, Jack being in the train with his wife and his father, something definite and unalterable had occurred.

"And what did you do when you'd seen the telegram?"

"I rushed straight to the station."

"What station?"

"Newcastle, of course. The train had just gone —just gone."

"What time was it?"

"Oh, I don't know. What does it matter?" Jack displayed a nervous sensitiveness.

"It doesn't."

"So I got hold of a Continental Bradshaw at the Royal Hotel, and then I went off to find Macdonald—Alistair Macdonald—you remember."

"The air fellow?"

"Yes. Alistair was in bed. I soon had him fixed up."

"Then you'd decided what to do?"

"I had."

"All in a moment?"

"Yes. Why not? Alistair was ready to go anywhere."

"Did you tell him why you were in such a hurry?"

"Certainly not. And he didn't ask either. He said there'd be a machine ready at the hangars, and there was. We left at seven forty-five this morning, passports and all. He had his—that was a bit of luck."

"Was it light?"

"Of course it was light. We were at Paris by eleven. Thought we'd better call there because of fuss about customs and so on if we didn't. Left Paris by noon, and we got to Aix-les-Bains here before three. Bit less than three hundred miles."

"Must have been jolly cold for you, eh?"

"Not a bit. Alistair fitted me out in leather. Everything was fine and clear. Think I'll take my overcoat off." Jack took his overcoat off, and sighed: "Well!" as he dropped it on the floor.

Said Alan, attempting humour in order to ease the sense of strain:

"I suppose you're doing that to prove to me that you were positively too hot on the journey."

"No, I wasn't." Jack answered quite simply and

seriously. "I wasn't. This place is a shade stuffy, you know."

Alan smiled with a certain sheepishness. Never could Jack see a joke—any more than his mother could.

"You've been at Aix for hours then?" Alan resumed.

"Nine hours about."

"Time to spare, eh?"

"Yes. But I nearly missed the train all the same."

"How?"

"Partly through old Mac wanting a big thing in suppers at a café—he's going back tomorrow morning—and partly because they wouldn't let me on to the platform here at Aix. Said I couldn't travel by the luxe if I hadn't a ticket for it, and there was no other train. Quite some fuss. I told them I didn't want to travel by the luxe or any other train—I'd only come to give the suitcase to someone who *was* travelling in the luxe. That, and me saying I'd flown from Paris, and—oh! —the usual arrangement in the end did it. But it was a near thing! I expect you saw me crossing the line just as the bally train came in."

"I should think so. Why did you choose Aix?"

"Well! Landing-ground. Alistair knew it. He knows most of 'em, but he didn't happen to know Dijon. Otherwise I should have joined you there. We came down not far off the lake. Lovely landing he made."

"Before dark, naturally."

"Oh rather! Had to make it in daytime or we should have been done in. That was why we started so early."

Alan continued to put trivial if interesting questions, and Jack continued to answer them, because both of them feared the graver part of the conversation, to which the discussion of the details of the journey was merely a futile introduction. Both of them had in their minds the picture of Pearl, solitary in her bolted compartment, and were cravenly pleased to be postponing a crisis.

"You came over some mountains, didn't you?"

"Nothing to speak of. There isn't a mound till the Côte d'Or—round about Dijon, you know. Aix is under a thousand feet!"

Now Alan sighed:

"And so here you are!"

Happy-go-lucky kind of person, Jack! But that was only his youthfulness. Youth did not calculate, plan, weigh pros and cons carefully. It took chances. The chances had favoured Jack. Wonderful thing, youth! The lad had decided in an instant what he would do; and he had done it, successfully. Earlier in the day he had been in Newcastle—Newcastle, another world, a million miles off. Then in the sky. Then in the suburbs of Paris. Then in the sky again; and over mountains. And lo! he was here, in the same train as Pearl! Marvellous! And he was quite modest over it. No doubt he had acted as observer during

the flight: but not a word from him about that. Yes, he was extremely modest. True, his prominent sharp chin was sticking out rather challengingly, the chin of one saying: "I said to myself I'd catch her, and I've caught her."

A shock for Pearl! Pearl could not but admire such rapid decision, such initiative, such enterprise, such success! Desert him? She could not. She was bound to admire him intensely for his feat, and to respond in the end to the passionate attachment to her which the feat so convincingly demonstrated. Any woman would. These troubles were not resolved by argument, but by emotion. He had said so before, and he said so again. How fortunate that Jack had always been keen on flying. Without that . . . He had just missed the war. But had he been a year older what a soldier he would have become! What an airman! What an ace! Yes, and a hundred to one he would have been in his grave.

An odd journey for Alan. The oddest he had ever been through. First, Pearl being in the train. Second, the amazing, nocturnal vanishing of the Lucasses. Third, the still more amazing arrival of Jack. Not to mention the earthquake in Jack's married life! He wondered whether anything else of a breath-taking nature would happen. Privately, he was growing somewhat more cheerful. The further he reflected upon the matter, the surer was his trust that it would reach a satisfactory conclusion. Of course there would remain the

ghastly business of Jack's standing for Labour. But that, now, in comparison with the threatened conjugal disaster, was already seeming less ghastly. After all . . .!

The train was being braked. Jack raised and twisted his arm to look at his wrist-watch. One-fifty.

"Chambéry," Alan murmured. "We're getting on."

Then a sharp tap-tap at the door. They both started. The attendant showed himself.

"Madame would wish to speak to Monsieur."

He addressed Alan. In his voice was an intonation subtly implying that Madame had ever strange caprices and all concerned must be resigned to them.

"*I*'ll go," said Jack, jumping up.

"Hold on!" Alan checked him. "If it's me she wants *I*'d better go." He thought it might be well to have speech with her first. She was reconsidering the situation; she was reconsidering. . . .

The two men faced one another, hostile for a moment. Jack's eyes gleamed.

"All right," said Jack.

## CHAPTER XIX

## CHAMBERY

THERE was a strong perfume in Pearl's compartment. Pearl had her back to the door and was bending over a valise. She turned only for an instant towards Alan.

"We're coming into Chambéry, aren't we?"

"Yes. Terrific odour here. Delicious, but a bit powerful."

"Knocked the stopper out of a scent-bottle. One of Molyneux's too. Full, and it cost me two pounds. Can't be helped. Never did such a thing before." She was crushing garments and apparatus into the valise.

Alan made no reply. His compartment and hers were two different worlds. Two pounds for a bottle of scent! Why scent? To attract women or men? Men. What men? All men? Or one? No, all men. What could be the effect of a faint odour on a man? But every woman did it. Even on Elaine, now and then, he had detected a faint, agreeable odour. Not that Elaine ever talked perfumes! She never did. Still, she used them —and they had absolutely no influence on the feelings towards her of her husband; at any rate,

so far as her husband was consciously aware. A different and a stranger world! Doubtless women knew what they were about in the matter of scent. Improbable that they could be wholly deceiving themselves. But two pounds—and he guessed a small bottle at that.

"See here," she said, without looking at him. "I'm going to get out at Chambéry. I can't stay in this train, and I won't!" Her clear, firm articulation! "But I wouldn't leave without telling you."

She had lost her head. She must have lost her head; inconceivable though it seemed that such a misfortune could have happened to such a woman as he, Alan, had judged her to be. Well, one more proof that all women were alike, and that he was a simpleton. He had an impulse to laugh and an impulse to curse. Comic, it was, how people were always either leaving this damned train or boarding it! He had been wondering whether a fourth incident would succeed the three odd incidents already arrived. Here it was. The astonishing folly of it! She must be prevented. But she could not be prevented, curse her!

"I see," he said quietly. "But you know you may be jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"How? What do you mean?"

She snapped the catch of the valise, and began to straighten her hat in the glass.

"Supposing Jack sees you?"

"But he won't see me—unless you go and tell him. I know he's in your compartment, because

I just looked in the corridor. I shall slip out at this end." She indicated the direction away from Alan's compartment.

"Do you think he'll stay alone there in my compartment when we get into the station? Not likely. Anybody who's up and restless always looks out. He mayn't move of course. But if he does? He's certain to see you. And what then? You may depend he'll go after you—like a shot. You can keep yourself to yourself here—if you want to. But at Chambéry station—and at Chambéry in the middle of the night . . .! At least that's my notion. I may be wrong. I daresay I am. Can I help you at all, my dear?"

She sat down and put her hands under her thighs, and tapped her perfect foot and said nothing. The train stopped with a bump, jerking her body a few inches forward. Alan had steadied himself by a hook in the wall. Silence. Stillness.

"You hadn't thought of that?"

"Well, no! That is, I hadn't really thought it out."

"You must be in a state then!" said Alan to himself. This was the nicely poised creature who had spoken so wisely in the restaurant-car. You might have imagined, then, that she was the wisest and coolest of her sex. And look at her! One thing to be urged in favour of the mild Elaine: she never did lose her head—hardly ever, and never completely! As a life's companion to a man she was preferable to the brilliant Pearl type. Peace! Peace before everything!

"You might shut the door properly," said Pearl with curtness.

Alan obeyed.

"How did he come here?"

"Flew."

"I knew it. But how did he know I should be in this train?"

"Hadn't you told him?" And Alan added privately: "I'm cleverer than you are. I don't propose to give anybody's show away. I stopped you from going by offering to help you to go. I'm not such a hopeless simpleton perhaps, my girl."

"Why should I tell him? I'd asked him to go away with me to the seaside for a couple of days. But he said he couldn't. Too busy. But he can find time to come running after me like this. And did *he* tell *me* where he was dining last night? He just said 'business.' He might have been open with me, and said it was to meet some of those Labour men—as I knew it was. Why should I tell him what *I* was going to do? Surely I can go and see my mother? She spent Christmas all alone, and I didn't want her to spend New Year alone, too. And she shan't."

"That's not the point," said Alan harshly, but by no means to Pearl, only to himself. She was not arguing fairly. She had lost her head, and now she was losing both her dignity and her sense of justice.

"Quite," he said aloud, soothingly. You had to soothe them, to hide your mind from them, to lie

to them: it was the condition of getting on with them at all.

"And then this mad escapade of his! He might have been killed! And I don't see how anybody can say it's very polite to a wife for a husband to rush after her as Jack has done. And bursting into the train in the middle of the night. Makes her feel like a runaway slave, that's what it does. And I've done nothing to deserve being treated like that. This isn't the nineteenth century."

"Pathetic," thought Alan. "Humiliating!" In the heavy, scent-laden air, with this young, fashionable woman in an advanced state of nerves, he could do nothing, though really he was on her side and against Jack; while with Jack he could have argued the case decently, honestly, and outspokenly, and there would have been none but an intellectual tension. The train started again, on another stage.

"There!" Pearl exclaimed. "We haven't been here for a minute. I could have slipped out easily, and Jack wouldn't have had time——"

Alan thought:

"If he'd seen you he'd have jumped out even if the train had been going twenty miles an hour!" But he kept mute.

"It isn't as if I hadn't made a good suggestion to him," Pearl proceeded. "It was a good suggestion that he would help Labour better by standing as a Conservative. He would have found plenty of supporters among the young Conser-

vatives. There's a lot of them. Now isn't it so?"

"Yes," Alan agreed sincerely. "I think it certainly was a good suggestion."

"But would he listen to it? No! He wouldn't let me finish. Believe me, when he finally told me what he meant to do—join Labour—he seemed to go absolutely mad. I flatter myself I was calm from start to finish."

Alan asked himself which of their utterly contradictory reports of that same interview was nearer the truth—or further from the truth. But whether Pearl was right or wrong—and from her present deportment he concluded with a natural bias that she was quite possibly wrong—he warmly regretted that she should have so far forgotten herself as to attack the son to his father. It was not decent. Women, however, were incapable of sustained decency.

"Chasing after me like a lunatic!" Pearl resumed her tirade.

"But you did rap on the window the moment you saw him," said Alan to himself. "That must have been an instinctive gesture, coming from the sub-conscious, showing your real attitude to him, my girl. You're trying to be angry with him and you're succeeding; but the fact is you're tremendously impressed, and pleased too, by what he's done today."

Suddenly he was filled with compassion for her. And he reproached himself for misogyny, and with remarkable detachment put his misogyny down

to fatigue. If she was a woman, she could not help it. Lovely in her distress, she made a picture to draw pity and admiration from the most blockish blockhead ever born a male. Confronted by these superb, delicate, delicious, incalculable beings, you had to take the rough with the smooth; you had to be ready cheerfully to pay the price—not a price of your own fixing, but theirs. Men indeed were ready: they always would be: it was a law of the universe. These strange beings, with their marvellous qualities, were entitled to forbearance and lovingkindness. You could do nothing for them but bestow lovingkindness. They were oppressed, by the very nature of things. They were caught in life like rats in a trap.

After an interminable, sterile discussion, which served merely to enfever Pearl, and which Alan felt must somehow be ended, he went to her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. She sprang up as though his hand had been red hot.

"I must see him. I must tell him what I think," she cried, desperate.

"Not now. You're too tired. You'll do it much better tomorrow morning. And he'll be easier to deal with then. He's had an exhausting day."

"No! Now! I can't rest till I've told him and had it out."

"Not in my compartment, anyhow," said Alan, with a grimness half-playful. "I must have some quiet, even if you don't. I'll fetch him."

He left her.

CHAPTER XX

## ACCIDENT

THE corridor was deserted as usual, electricity wasting brilliantly in its roof. The door of Alan's own compartment was shut; Jack had been very patient, with the patience of a hunter sure of his quarry. The doors of all the compartments were shut. The blinds of two of the corridor windows had been drawn up at Aix-les-Bains. Some meticulous official had been along and drawn them down again, and hooked them. No apparent life within the great, pounding, vibrating, rumbling life of the entity of the train! Not a sign of the emotional upheaval in Pearl's compartment or in Alan's! And there were half a dozen other compartments in the carriage, and seven or eight other carriages full of compartments, and any or every compartment might be concealing some mortal affliction within its luxury. Alan pictured the succession of compartments from one end of the train to the other. And how many other similar trains might there not be that night on the face of Europe speeding from nowhere to nowhere!

And as the compartments were hidden away from the corridor, so was the outer world hidden

away behind the blinds. Of the outer world nothing could be divined except that the track was steadily rising towards the distant height of Mont Cenis. Alan could feel the mighty impulse of the engine as it doggedly forced itself, and dragged its tremendous convoy, up the incline.

He stood still, thinking of just what he ought to say to Jack in order to smooth as much as possible the approaches to the coming interview between husband and wife. He was a little frightened of Jack. He had been assuming throughout that Jack would not yield; and now he was surer than ever that Jack would not yield. Pearl must yield —the woman must yield. And she would. Undoubtedly she had a grievance against the fanatic, but she must suffer it. What *was* the thing, after all, in comparison with the sum of human infelicity? Naught! Naught but imagination, the fruit of ruthless egotism. Still, he hesitated to confront Jack. Jack might pester him with a lot of awkward questions, might even say, in his direct simplicity, that since Pearl had fastened him out of her compartment she must herself invite him to enter the same. Absurd of course; unwise. But he knew Jack. These fanatics with their winsomeness and their consciences and their abstract principles and their unwitting cruelty, were capable of being the very devil.

His gaze examined the corridor, and saw black, gritty dust on every ledge. The train was filthy. Hands were filthy. All trains, even those best

entitled to be called "de luxe," became odiously uninhabitable after a few hours of continuous travelling. That was to say, on the continent, not in England. English coal . . . The famous Scotch expresses . . . Something ought to be done about Continental trains, so absurdly labelled "de luxe." Perhaps in the future trains would be kept as clean as cabins on board ship, and people would refer condescendingly, incredulously, to the barbaric conditions of travel in the nineteen twenties.

Alan was thus idly reflecting while he made up his mind to summon Jack, when he heard an unusual thunderous sound from the invisible world beyond the boundaries of the train. The sound disquieted him, and restored his sense of proportion—dust was a trifle. Then there was a frightful bump of the whole carriage, a bump which seemed to prelude the end of the world, a horror-inspiring bump unlike any other bump in his experience. Then a second bump—worse. The carriage might have been instantaneously deprived by some sinister miracle of all its springs. The carriage leapt from bump to bump. It leapt into the air, and dropped to a cast-iron ground with an appalling thud, utterly unresilient, and leapt again.

"We're off the rails," he muttered, in a panic.

His instinct was to rush for companionship to Jack, the enterprising, the resourceful, the image of youth, his son. But in the same moment he knew that he dared not stir, and must not stir. Safety, or comparative safety, was in clamping himself

immovably to the structure of the carriage. He clenched his left hand frantically on one of the leather loops that hung under the windows, and pushed the other hand against the wall that separated the compartments from the corridor. The train appeared to be slackening speed, but the leaps and the bumps increased in nerve-shattering violence. He gave a cry. He heard a muffled cry from the other side of the compartment-wall. Only a few seconds earlier he had been secure, proud, assessing the far future without any sense of the ridiculousness of so doing. Now the future was brutally, implacably, lopped to the limit of another few seconds, and he had been diminished to a helpless insect under the indifferent heel of fate. He felt sick, without manhood, without dignity or self-respect. He would have sold his soul to be out of the murderous train, in a field, anywhere far from the line.

But in some recess of his intelligence he was thinking, with unimaginable rapidity, as he wedged and clamped and jammed his stretched body in the width of the corridor, about Mrs. Lucass. The hag-beauty was justified of destiny. She had had a premonition, an intuition, whatever you cared to call it. She had raised hell in the train, and had continued to raise hell. She had been perfectly preposterous, and continued to be perfectly preposterous. She had outraged the patience of her commonsense old husband again and again. She had kept up the agitation for hours. She had

fought against wisdom and been beaten, and fought anew. She had jumped on to a nameless wet platform, and forced her man to jump. She had planted herself and him there in the middle of space at the end of a string of possessions forty yards long. And she had escaped a railway accident.

She had been right—for the wrong reasons, but spectacularly right. She would be the star-turn of the front pages of three thousand newspapers. She had silenced her old man for ever. Never again would he dare to withstand her. The woman who had had a mystic warning of the disaster, and who had obeyed the warning! There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio . . . Setting forth on a Friday! Sequences of three in calamity! Not one without a second: not two without a third! And yet—Alan maintained obstinately in the very face of death—it was all silly. The greatest blow for superstition ever struck by mischievous chance! Superstition was re-established on its crazy throne. . . . But could there be something in it after all? Were there more things in heaven and earth, Horatio . . .?

All these thoughts in a flash in the recess of Alan's intelligence!

A ceiling-light went out, fell; the bulb dashed itself against the outer wall of the carriage, and spread in front of Alan in small crystal fragments on the carpet. That tinkling smash was like a herald of more horrific wrath to come. Alan tried again to call, but his throat was soundless. The

bumping, thudding, leaping, grinding persisted, and to them was adding the whine of strained woodwork. The entire carriage seemed to be in pain, in the agony of final extinction. Alan wished for death to end it. He wished also to be in a suit of clothes with stout boots on his feet instead of in a grotesque dressing-gown with senile slippers. Why in hell's name did no occupant of a compartment open a door? Why did no attendant arrive and stop all this idiocy? Why was there no life in the carriage save his, Alan's? Would the next bump kill him dead? Or would he be merely maimed? What would Elaine say when she received the news? And Miss Office? Miss Office would be out of a job. They might see the first tidings in a paper. They would stare at one another. No. Miss Office's train was behind, the train of the humble, the safe train. What was Pearl thinking now of her piffling quarrel with Jack? Was Jack still the victorious husband? Jack—scatheless after a day in an aeroplane, only to be destroyed in a train de luxe! Funny!

The awful shocks succeeded one another without end. Surely momentum could not persist indefinitely. The train must reach equilibrium sooner or later. Yes, and when it did it would go up in roaring flames on the mountain-side. . . . Smell of burnt flesh! Alan's flesh! Writhings! He knew that he was grimacing in a shameful and degrading manner. He must be worthy of himself. He arranged his features as well as he could, as

though God on the seat of Judgment held him with omnipotent eye.

Then a sudden rending of wood, rather like the tearing of paper; and a section of the compartment-wall collapsed, some of it falling on Alan, who felt nothing. Asmodeus might have demolished it, mistaking it for a roof. Alan had full view of the interior of a comically contorted compartment. Of the partition of this compartment only the door remained upright. Alan straightened his features a second time, for they had got loose again, lest he might be observed. He saw a middle-aged woman in a saffron-coloured night-dress, on her hands and knees on the floor, moaning and pulling fantastic faces. A man was leaning precariously from an upper berth on his stomach; he seemed to be dazed. A bump, and he slipped helpless, over the edge of the berth and fell on the top of the woman, who squealed. Neither of them moved. Alan gradually remembered having seen them in the restaurant-car, very prim and correct, conversing in low tones. A walking-stick jumped, apparently by its own volition, out of a rack in the compartment and flew like a descending rocket towards the floor of the compartment, alighting with neatness on its ferrule. The whole place was full of physical magic by which inanimate objects were endowed with life: a spiritualistic seance in a bright light —no deception possible.

Then every light was extinguished, as if turned off at the main switch by a devil of an electrician.

Blackness! Blackness which accentuated the effect of the bumping and the thudding! And then a gigantic boy seemed to be scraping a ruler along the outside of the carriage. Alan heard the shattering of all the windows in a series. He heard showers and cascades of splintered glass, and the flapping of ripped blinds. He felt glass on his head and on his back. The bumping and the thudding went slower. The train stopped. Equilibrium was established.

But because the floor was now no more a floor but a steep slope, Alan stumbled and fell, and he decided that he would not trouble at the moment to get up. He just lay in the blackness. He was aware of something exquisitely cold and soft under his chin. Then there was a tiny flickering flare; and he saw that the man in the compartment was sitting on his haunches and had struck a match. The woman seemed to be asleep; she was shockingly indecent. In the light of the match Alan saw that the something white and soft under his chin was a big lump of snow, and that blood was making red spots on it—drop, drop, drop, slowly, reluctantly.

## CHAPTER XXI

## ALIVE

ALAN was now lying on his back, and there was something (he thought) under his head. The darkness was complete. The silence and the stillness were complete. Also it was very cold. He had a sensation of extraordinary fatigue; he had never in his life been so tired; in fact it was quite curiously interesting to feel as tired as he felt then.

"At any rate I'm alive," he reflected. "And not hurt. What does it matter about being tired? But what a business! What a business! So this is a railway accident, and I've been in it, and I'm not dead! And it's over!"

He was proud of the experience. Then he wondered if there were any dead bodies lying near him. Probably no injured, because an injured person would moan or make other sort of sound; and he could hear nothing whatever. Uncanny! Uncanny, too, that there should be no gleam of light, even a diffused light, anywhere! He suddenly had the notion: "Am I blind?" He became aware of a disagreeable phenomenon on his forehead. He had not dared to attempt to move a limb, lest he should find himself unable to move.

But he gently tried his arm. Yes, it responded normally to the command of the brain. He put his hand to that incommoded forehead, and unintentionally pushed the something away, and saw in front of him a railway lamp. He could trace the wire handle of it, the smeared lens, and the broad wick smokily burning behind. He was puzzled.

"My intelligence isn't equal to this," he reflected. "I'm too tired. Someone must telegraph to Elaine. I can't do it myself—no use pretending I can."

Then he comprehended that he was within a compartment. Not the usual double compartment, but one of those narrow things at the ends of carriages. No lavatory to it. They were generally occupied by train-attendants, who wrote figures down in books of accounts, or examined bundles of tickets or passports. He described the window in the sombre light of the lamp, which was in front of him beyond his feet. The glass of the window was smashed to bits. An icy draught was coming through that window.

"Well," he reflected, "I've heard of funny things happening in railway accidents, but that I should have been pitched up here takes the cake."

For, as he had gathered, he was lying at full length on the seat of the compartment. The solution of the enigma gradually illumined his mind.

"I've been picked up and carried here, and I never knew anything about it. I wish I wasn't so

tired. After all, I haven't been doing much, have I? So I fainted. Nothing to faint for, but I must have fainted."

Outside the window—invisibility. Then he heard shouting very far in the distance; and then crunching steps below the window. The silhouette of a head and shoulder appeared in the oblong of the window; the head shifted to right and left, peering. If it was not Jack's head, it was the devil's.

"That's not you, is it, Jack?" He noticed his voice was as tired as his body.

"Hello! Hello!" Jack's cheerful tones. "How d'ye feel, Dad?"

Jack's voice was the most comfortable, inspiring sound he had ever heard in all his life. He entirely forgot for a few moments that he was tired.

"I'm all right. Who put me here? Why was I brought here?"

"You got a smack on the eyebrow, and so we picked you up and here you are. Doctor said there was nothing to worry about."

"What doctor? Have they got doctors already?"

" 'Already!' It's long since. More than an hour. But there were two doctors in the train—English or Scotch."

"You been hurt, Jack?"

"Not me."

"And Pearl?"

Jack answered, but with less conviction: "She's as right as rain."

"I hope her face isn't marked."

"She isn't marked anywhere. She isn't hurt."

"But surely she's shaken."

"Doesn't show it."

"Many killed?"

"No! Nobody killed! At least I haven't heard of anybody being killed. Fourteen injured, if you count yourself, Dad."

"Badly?"

"One, I fancy. They've taken him away, to the village."

"What village?"

"La Praz. We're right in the mountains, you know. A thousand metres up, they say. That's what I heard. We must be close to the frontier. Of course it might have been much worse if we hadn't been going uphill. The train didn't want a lot of stopping, you see."

"Not a lot of stopping! Good God! It seemed to me to run on for about ten minutes after we were off the line."

"Ten seconds more like."

"I don't believe it."

And Alan did not, could not, believe it. In calculating the time at ten minutes he had at first thought himself to be quite moderate, though on consideration he was prepared to reduce his estimate to five minutes—but the longest five minutes of his existence.

"How did it happen?"

"Oh! They don't really tell you. But you can

see the other train out here." Jack waved an arm.

"What other train?"

"Some special train that two American bankers had had, for Turin. It was returning empty. An engine and two carriages. The engine's nearly upside down. It left the track—some catch-points open or something, and hit our engine and glanced off and hit us again. Anyhow that's the talk. I daresay it's all wrong. The engine fairly scraped our coach from end to end, or rather we scraped the engine."

"Oh, so *that* was it!" Alan recalled the notion of the gigantic boy with the ruler.

"Yes, it was that that stopped us in the end. I can tell you one thing for sure: only three of our coaches left the track. All the rest stuck to it like grim death."

"Where's Pearl?'

"She'll be coming in a minute."

"Whose is this rug someone's put over me?"

"Don't know. I found it lying outside, so I took it."

"You must telegraph to your mother. She may hear of the accident. She ought to get the telegram first."

"Yes, yes," Jack agreed, rather casually.

His eyes accustomed to the dim light, Alan could now see his son more clearly. The wide collar of his overcoat turned up round his slim neck; the tweed cap at the back of his head; his much dis-

arranged hair showing; his mobile features bright, alert, benevolent. Alan was intensely glad to have the boy with him. Supposing he had been all alone! . . . Awful! A marvellous thing, youth. Jack had shaken off the accident as a dog emerging from a pond shakes off the water. . . .

There were queer matters, nevertheless. How, for instance, was it that he, Alan, had been left by himself on the seat there, unconscious? Seemed a bit negligent, that. But Alan would say nothing about it.

"What's that white on your overcoat, my boy? Is it snowing?"

"Just started again. I'll be back in a minute. You're all serene for the present, aren't you?" He dropped down and was gone. Strange that he had not come round to the other side of the coach into the compartment, even if it had only been for a second!

"Come back soon. Or send Pearl," Alan cried, as loudly as he could, and there was more strength in his voice now. Then he thought: "How absurd of me! As if he could possibly hear!"

He felt much better; more cheerful; he seemed curiously to be quite calm within. The idea of sitting up occurred to him; it presented itself as an interesting and rather audacious adventure. He sat up; no difficulty. He leaned back, set his feet on the floor, like an ordinary traveller who has wakened from a long sleep. He touched the bandage round his forehead and decided that it must be a towel; it was fastened with a safety-pin.

He wanted to look at himself, and see what sort of a ridiculous figure of comicality he made, his head swathed, in his crimson dressing-gown, and his trailing pyjamas under the dressing-gown.

Of course at home, in a similar condition of damage, to sit near a broken window in the middle of a cold night and in a snowstorm, would have been regarded as incredible folly, and half a dozen human beings would have conspired to remove him by force and save him from fatal consequences. But as in the Folkestone train, so now, the sense of relative values was all altered. He was convinced that harm could not result from exposure to a perfect gale that penetrated the thick dressing-gown, turning it into gauze. As for a cold, a chill—affrighting bugbear of normal life in London, precursor of pneumonia, pleurisy, death—it was reduced to naught by the enormity of the general situation.

He even edged himself nearer to the window and the lamp. The metal top of the lamp was so hot that it burnt his fingers when his hand came in contact with it. Pressing towards it, he felt the warmth from it in his groin. He looked out, but could see nothing except a few butterfly snowflakes, large and white, immediately behind the black aperture; the field of vision was limited to the oblong and a depth of a yard beyond. One or two snowflakes wandered undecided, capricious, into the compartment; one alighted on his cheek; a delicious caress. The wind, though it froze him, was agree-

able, and very invigorating. He had a desire to stand up, stick his head through the window, and enlarge the visible world: scores of various exciting phenomena to be observed! But he dared not attempt the feat; audacity had bounds.

He heard no voices now, but a clanking of metal on metal, regular and persistent; it stopped; it began again; it rang resoundingly in the darkness.

He stooped and picked up the rug, which had slipped on to the floor. The owner would be thinking regretfully that he had lost a valuable rug in the railway accident. As he stooped he felt something hard in the pocket of his dressing-gown. He thought: "What the devil can that be? I never carry things in my dressing-gown." It was a small book. "What the——" With the book he found a piece of thick glass. Where was that from? He had forgotten the cascade of glass from smashed windows. He dropped the glass, and held the book under the ray of the lamp. His Wordsworth. Weird! He supposed that he must have pushed the book into his pocket instead of beneath his pillow, after failing to read intelligently as he lay in bed during the earlier part of the night. But his mind had absolutely no memory of the unusual act. It was the same book, plainly recognisable, but it had the strangeness of a book never before seen.

He opened it flat on the seat, almost touching the base of the lamp, which highly illuminated it. He bent over it. No! Without eye-glasses he

could not read. And where were his eye-glasses? Fancy looking for eye-glasses in a smashed railway-coach! He could never recover them: which would mean an order to the oculist. He wondered whether Miss Office had kept the prescription in a discoverable place. She was not very orderly. Once, while she was away, he had looked into the drawers of her desk—and been horrified by the sight. He would have a thing or two to tell Miss Office. She would be very . . . But at the distance of a couple of feet or a bit less he could, with difficulty, decipher average print. He slowly remembered having done so on more than one occasion when needs must and eye-glasses lacked. He deciphered:

> Scenes different there are,
> Full-formed, that take, with small internal help,
> Possession of the faculties—the peace
> That comes with night; the deep solemnity
> Of nature's intermediate hours of rest,
> When the great tide of human life stands still——

He did not fully comprehend it, and it was certainly not apposite to a railway accident. But it instantly lifted his mood to a higher plane. The conscious emotion, and the far greater sub-conscious emotion, due to the Pearl-Jack trouble followed by the accident and his escape, were released and transformed into the beatific. He was born again. He exulted in the existence of Pearl and Jack, and in his own. The accident was over, and nobody had been killed, and he had passed through

a tremendous ordeal which would enlarge his experiences of living and quicken all the faculties of his soul. He surveyed the great tide of human life and saw its mysterious beauty. He had reached a marvellous calm, and loved all men. He again had the sensation of pride at being in a first-rate spectacular railway accident. Often he would be asked about it, and often he would refer to it without being asked. It set him apart; it set apart all the participators in it. Something petty, perhaps, in such feelings, but there they were, cheering him.

Impatience had left him. He could wait in tranquillity for the next step. He was sorry that he had cried out to Jack to come back soon—even though Jack had not heard him. He could wait, and everything in its due course would come. The time would come when he would be sitting quietly with his wife and looking far back at the accident and discussing with her the details of it, and relating to her eager ears the whole history of the Pearl-Jack affair, then to have been settled. He now could see nothing whatever to worry about in Jack developing into a Labour M.P. Jack was an honest man; Jack must fulfil himself; an honest man could not be made ridiculous. All right activities could be justified, and Pearl's deep commonsense would be her salvation.

He was transpierced by the cold wind. But he did not care, and it still caused him no apprehensions. If he had been laid senseless on the veldt

in the night without protection, and had come to, in a cutting cold wind, he would have survived the exposure, would indeed have thanked heaven for his life. The same now, and much more so. Life had never been so precious—not because he had nearly lost it, but because the savour of it was sharpened to him by the education of the faculties of his spirit.

"Now, Dad!" Jack strode into the compartment from the corridor. "You must just see whether you can do anything with these. Pearl has an idea you'll catch cold in that swagger dressing-gown."

His tone had in it some accent of the adult addressing a child. But Alan, who knew himself immeasurably wiser than Jack, did not care. He liked the tone; he liked to be a child. They had been thinking of him; Pearl had been thinking of him. Jack had in his arms Alan's travelling-suit, his new blue overcoat, a hat, socks and boots.

"Do you think you can?"

"Of course," said Alan. "But my shirt?"

"Pooh! What does the shirt matter? Put these on over your pyjamas. It'll be warmer. Here, one second." He drew Alan's spirit-flask from the overcoat pocket. "A drop of this first."

Jack stood above him, confident, happy amid the disaster, almost gay, very powerful, and magnificent in youth. And his voice was elated. The sight of him was extraordinarily inspiring. Yes! Alan did exult in the mere existence of him and Pearl.

"And Pearl?" he demanded.

"Pearl's splendid. She's the only woman with any sense in this train." Evidently Jack too was exulting in the existence of Pearl. The breach between them had evidently been repaired to perfection.

"We shall be getting you out of here soon," said Jack, as he helped his father in the gloom to remove the dressing-gown.

Alan felt joyously ready for anything. His optimism was vindicated.

CHAPTER XXII

## SELF-SATISFACTION

ALAN was puzzled again. There were three windows on the side of the compartment opposite to the corridor, and the blinds of all of them were down; whereas previously he had noted only the middle window, of which the blind had been up and the glass was smashed, letting in a ruthless polar breeze. Somebody must have lowered the middle blind. The other two blinds were steady, but the middle blind fluttered and faintly rattled. A grey light showed round the edges of all the blinds, and enabled him to distinguish objects plainly enough in the compartment. The oil-lamp was out; he touched it—quite cold now. The Wordsworth lay open on his knee. Then he hit on the solution of the extraordinary enigma, and for a moment it was as wonderful as might have been a fundamental discovery in science. He had slept! Yet he had no recollection of going to sleep or of trying or hoping to go to sleep. Marvellous! He glanced at his watch, which marvellously was in its proper pocket! After half-past six! He had slept for hours.

"Funny, this neglecting me for so long!" he thought, resentfully. "Especially Jack!"

But a second new illuminating idea occurred to him: he had not been neglected; "they" had come in, seen that he was asleep, and left him to rest; how quietly must the middle blind have been lowered! He was contrite about his resentment. . . . Yes, he remembered reading, with great difficulty, some more Wordsworth, and he remembered nothing later. He loosed the middle blind, which flew up with a sharp sound. He could discern the landscape. Trees: a forest. Snow was no longer falling. He thought:

"As it isn't snowing I ought to go out."

This was the way in which his mind was working: it grasped only one factor of a situation. He was an invalid, both physically and morally; but the snow had ceased—therefore he was entitled to go out. Feeling refreshed and adventurous, he went forth strongly into the corridor.

The door of the carriage was open. The snowy ground was far below him; he stepped down cautiously but neatly. Except that his suit hid pyjamas instead of vest, shirt and pants, he was fully dressed. He had stout boots, his new thick overcoat, and a soft hat, which had been left for him on the seat in the compartment, together with his eye-glasses. (A laudable attention to detail on Jack's part—or Pearl's!)

He could not now see the forest, because the carriage intervened, but in front of him he saw a road.

Though he knew that he was not in a dream, his sensations had the strange, exciting, but scarcely convincing quality of a dream. The hardness of the track beneath the thin, uneven snow was unlike any other hardness that his feet had ever experienced; a romantic hardness. Dawn had just begun, and the dawn was a unique dawn, a phenomenon miraculous. He could feel the oncoming of the dawn, its resistless growth from moment to moment. In the dawn all colours were merged into a varied grey; the snow was grey; the bare soil was a darker grey; the distances were a still darker grey. It was all restful, soothing, yet mysteriously stirring, vitalising. He was happy with an excess of life. He hummed a fragment of an air from an opera. His perceptions were slow; there was nothing for him yet but himself and the earth, and the heavy sky out of which the dawn was flowing.

Then he turned and looked up at the carriage from which he had descended—and was shocked. It was not a coach of the International Sleeping Car Company at all. It was an ordinary first-class carriage, and German. His brain was abashed in bewilderment. Further, and worse, the carriage stood by itself on a siding; he saw the main lines stretched tight on one hand and on the other in the driven snow, and the carriage all alone in the system, a lost microcosm, forgotten of mankind. The entire railway accident seemed to have been conjured away by sinister magic. He put a hand

to his forehead—unconscious gesture, symbolising that his over-tired brain needed succour. . . . Then relief came. Yes, there was the railway accident, real enough, far up to the left. He could see dimly a group of carriages, horridly disordered; moving dark dots of people; a flare fighting a losing fight against the dawn. The spectacle coincided reassuringly well with a sane man's notion of what a railway accident ought to look like. And he heard, intermittently, the metallic clangour which he had heard hours earlier.

He walked, instinctively, without thinking, in the direction of the spectacle. Immediately he emerged from the shelter of the carriage the wind startled him by its sudden bleak attack, blowing aside the skirts of his overcoat. Still, he was well covered and felt quite warm. He walked uncertainly on, by the edge of the track, towards the spectacle. He walked more slowly, then stopped. He could not proceed. He had plenty of physical energy: but some moral inhibition had affected his legs.

"I daren't go up there," he confessed to himself. "I couldn't face it. I should have to talk to people. I should have to explain myself. And I can't stand any conversation. I shall just wait till Jack fetches me." Much reliance on Jack. "This is absurd. Of course I can face it." He made a new effort; but stopped again. "No! I'd better stay here. Supposing I missed Jack, and he came along to the carriage and I wasn't there!" Pitiable excuse. "Jack's bound to come along soon."

He could now distinguish some details. There was the light engine of the bankers' special train, lying on one set of its wheels, the other set of wheels in the air, the funnel seeming actually to touch a carriage of the train de luxe. Unnatural, almost obscene object, frightening. The two coaches tied to its tail were upright, but askew. He could clearly make out the three damaged and horribly disfigured sleeping-cars which had left the rails but incredibly had not toppled over. Behind them were the restaurant-car, unharmed, and a brake-van or something, also unharmed. He trembled, realising, as it were for the first time, the significance and the potentialities of the accident in which he had escaped death.

"I was in one of those carriages. Look at it. Jack was in one. Pearl was in one. We might have been . . ."

He was sickeningly afraid of a danger past and finished with. He was more afraid now than he had been in the moments of worst peril. His imagination was at work.

Then commonsense, then exultation, then tranquillisation. He was saved; he was whole. Jack and Pearl were saved—beloved beings. There had been no deaths. Destiny was unbelievable; it was solemnising; it brooded majestically over the earth. The earth as he saw it had gradually evolved; human society had evolved . . . For this! He was re-born. Life had been bestowed upon him afresh, more beautiful, more romantic, with

larger responsibilities, graver and sweeter duties, more vast horizons. He loved life and the living; he longed to exercise kindness and charity.

Where were the cars which had been in front of the derailed cars? Where was the big express engine? Vanished away? Strange! He crossed the track to get a new view of the scene, and noticed that the dawn had further advanced, was probably complete. The hard wind was chilling him a little; but he could resist its effect. A few snowflakes floated hesitatingly down out of the smooth, menacing sky. Yes, it was snowing again. He saw a knot of people, a small engine fussily smoking, its black plume continually torn by the wind and perseveringly repaired at the funnel. He saw what seemed to be a crane, hugely arching over a huge, reclining body, which was the body of the express engine and tender. But of the front part of the train de luxe, no trace. Then he saw, beyond the scene, a black hole in the flank of the mountain —dreadful! The dreadful entrance into the terrifying eight miles of the Mont Cenis tunnel—the rash enterprise of man against nature. Impudent surgery! How could man dare? Magnificent cheek! . . . It was in fact only the entrance to a short tunnel, some miles nearer than the Mont Cenis, which he forgot was beyond Modane, the frontier station. But its effect upon him was the same as if it had been what he believed it to be.

His glance nervously wandered. It was held again by the sight of a woman approaching from the

jumbled trains. She had marked him, and was evidently bearing down directly upon him. His impulse was to avoid her by flight; but dignity, as dear now as ever, kept him still to meet the encounter. She came nearer, and nothing would stop her. He perceived that she was a brisk, youngish middle-aged creature in a short frock and a thick mantle above it, with a permanent grievance printed in the lines of her worn, harsh face; she dangled a bag in one hand. Forgetting dear dignity, Alan at last turned to flee. A man was approaching from behind. Caught, Alan stood.

"Trying to get warm," the woman addressed him unceremoniously in a loud voice, while yet a few yards off. Alan smiled stupidly, petrified. She stopped. "You see the handle of this bag? You see how it's bent. Well, it was bent in the accident, and I don't know how. All I know is if I can't get it straightened I shall have to have a new bag. Don't you think these French railway accidents are simply monstrous? They're always having them. And how long shall we be here? Of course I've lived in France for years." (Why "of course"? thought the purist, Alan.) "But after this I'm going back to America, because Italy is just as bad for accidents, or nearly." (She had so slight an accent that he would not have noticed at first her American origin.) "My husband's from Brooklyn. He does a great deal for music in France and Italy. Subsidises young players—doesn't matter to him whether they're

American or not. And I was going to meet him in Rome for a concert he's giving for one of his young geniuses. I didn't want to go. I mean I didn't want to go just now. But he wanted me to be there. He likes me to work with him. And so I started. Vurry inconvenient; not that I mind that, if it's for art. And then they have this accident. They've got the engine out of the way and sent some of the coaches on to Modane already. Only they made me wait. Said there was no more room. Well, I believe they *were* rather packed. And after all an accident's an accident, though they don't seem to think so in this country. They say there'll be a train down from Modane very soon. But will there? My husband will be so disappointed if I miss the concert. He wants me there. Not that I mind—myself. I'm fine. Some of them are suffering from shock, but I'm fine. But I do think that these French railway accidents . . ." She scowled. "Funny about the handle of this bag, isn't it? And of course it *would* be just this bag, because I was just crazy about it." She started to move on. "I see you've got some blood on your forehead."

"Yes," agreed Alan limply, but he doubted whether she had heard.

He sent his reflections after her:

"You're like that, and I'm sorry for you. It must be very awkward for you sometimes, going about the world with no sense of proportion. And no sensitiveness and no feeling for others, and

talking all the time too. You must miss such a lot of things. But you can't help it. And I admit it was odd about the twisting of that gun-metal handle. Yes, I do admit that. And you're upset by the accident even if you aren't aware of it. Perhaps you don't always talk so loud and so all the time. Who am I to judge you? I might have been dead. . . . So might you."

The man approaching from behind was upon him. Alan recognised the fierce-eyed, black-moustached *maître d'hôtel* of the restaurant-car. He wore his chocolate-coloured trousers and a thin, black alpaca coat, and had a napkin tied around his neck for a muffler. With formal respect undiminished by unusual circumstances he raised his cap by its hard shiny black peak.

"You're all right then," Alan greeted him in English.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm very glad. Your car wasn't damaged?"

"No, sir. I have been to the station to telephone for orders. If it can be put back on the other way [line] we shall go to Modane. If not——" he shrugged his shoulders and gesticulated: his fingers were whitish-blue.

"That a station over there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know if the conductor of my sleeping-car was hurt?"

"What number—your car, sir?"

"Six. I think it was six."

"Ah! Six. André. No, sir. He was with me at the moment of the misfortune." The *maître d'hôtel* gave a sinister smile, and unable to maintain his professional reserve, suddenly became one man talking to another about a third. "I was speaking with him. He was very preoccupied by the question of his *pourboires*. You see, sir, an accident is not favourable to us. One forgets the *pourboires* after an accident. It is natural. But——"

"Quite," said Alan sympathetically. "Quite."

"He has already been in one catastrophe. He knows what he is talking of. Yes, sir . . . I have still some food in my car, sir, if Monsieur wishes——"

"Thanks," said Alan.

"Perhaps the fellow introduced the subject of tips on purpose," he reflected, smiling indulgently to himself after the *maître d'hôtel* had passed on. A reminder. Clever of him. And why shouldn't André or whatever his name is be preoccupied by his *pourboires*? I remember last year a sleeping-car conductor telling me that they got no salary, and had to pay for the cleaning of the cars; and some passengers only gave them ten francs. I must remember André. He's come through with his life, like me, but why shouldn't he be preoccupied by his *pourboires*? I daresay he has a wife and family. And who will telegraph to his wife to tell her he's safe? Why shouldn't he be——? I mustn't forget André."

The wife of the Brooklyn husband was returning.

The charity which had been characterising Alan's verdicts on human nature was not durable enough to fit him for a second encounter with her. With carefully dignified deliberation he walked towards the road which ran parallel with the railway-line, thinking, self-critical:

"Why am I so self-satisfied with my damned kindly understanding of people, putting myself in their place, and all that?" He tried to smother his odious, preening self-satisfaction, and failed.

He could not, without acrobatics which he felt to be dangerous, get into the road. The station? Amusing to visit the station. He walked along on the railway side of the fence. The white road was deserted. Not a soul to be interested in the accident! Odd! He could hear, beyond the road, the rushing chatter of a river. And he saw a large factory, with glimpses of flame and tiny jets of unruly steam here and there. Some kind of metal-works, he surmised. The factory was functioning as usual, and the employees were allowed no leisure to go and gaze at railway accidents. And millions of people were still asleep, to whom a railway accident would be naught but a paragraph in a newspaper. That day they would have two accidents in their evening papers. But he, Alan, gave little thought to the first accident, which apparently had happened both on the Marseilles line and on the Bordeaux line.

The station was scarcely more than a shack. The painted word "Lampisterie" caught his eye.

The Lucasses! Dash the woman! How wrongly right she had been! He stepped up on to the low platform. An old man appeared from the shack, and glared severely at Alan, who did his best to look jaunty.

"*Bonjour*," said Alan.

"*Bonjour*, monsieur. Your ticket if you please, monsieur."

"You are marvellous," said Alan. "You are all that is most marvellous, and incredible."

Then the figure of the old porter-stationmaster began to wave in the strangest curves.

## CHAPTER XXIII

## THE DRAMA

THE coach began to move, and the instant it moved Alan realised that he was not the steel-nerved creature he had complacently imagined himself to be. But he reinforced his nerves by volition.

He had fainted in front of the porter-station-master. Jack, alarmed by his disappearance from the German carriage, had heard of his wanderings from the last person to see him, the *maître d'hôtel* of the restaurant-car, who had gone with Jack to find the unlicensed invalid rambler. The swoon had been momentary. Part of the way Alan had to be carried by Jack and the *maître d'hôtel*; then, when they took a spell, he had walked a few steps; he had completed the journey on a stretcher. The goal was a waiting train, beyond the scene of the accident, which train the railway company by an astounding feat of extempore organisation had despatched from Modane! It was the prodigious arrival of this train, with the outcry of its excited and proud officials about the need of hurry—according to them it could not and would not wait more than three minutes even for emperors and

princes!—that had sent Jack in search of his erring father.

Alan had had his first sight of Pearl since the disaster. She was very efficient; she had directed Jack. And now Alan was stacked up in one corner of the compartment, and the entire hand-luggage of Alan, Pearl and Jack, most exhaustively collected out of the accident, in another. Unfortunately for the reputation of the railway company, the train, which bore lying labels to the effect that it was bound for St. Michel-de-Maurienne, was composed exclusively of third-class compartments. Unfortunately also it was much too long for the requirements of the situation. But a happy consequence of this largesse was that the Frith-Walter family had an entire coach to themselves. Alan sat on hard, yellow, unclean wood. The compartments were not properly compartments, but mere semi-enclosures. No privacy except the chill and draughty privacy of the entire coach! For there was no heating. "Well," Alan had philosophically thought at first, "this is how ninety per cent. of people have to travel, and it's just as well to be reminded of the fact."

Jack was temporarily absent. Pearl was seated opposite to Alan. Though neat and tidy, she had dirty hands and face, and she was cleaning her face with powder or something. She perched on the edge of the bench, a costly leather bag by her side, and gazed intently and very seriously at her features in a hand-mirror. She might have been

preparing those features for a court ball. She dropped the puff and found a lipstick. "Women," thought Alan, "are like nothing else on God's earth." He said aloud, weakly facetious:

"Modane ought to be impressed when you get out on to the platform." Incidentally he was trying to ignore the disconcerting movement of the train.

Without interrupting her task, without shifting her eyes from the mirror, Pearl retorted:

"D'you know, you've been rather naughty." Her tone was kindly, but it was too indulgent for Alan's taste; she was a devil of a woman.

"How, naughty?" he enquired, though he knew the answer.

"Going off like that all by yourself. You really did give us a bit of a fright." Pearl began severely, but ended in accents expressing a tactful clemency.

"Well," said Alan, "how was I to know? I felt all right. And *you* might have fainted, my dear, if you'd been asked for your ticket in these delightful circumstances. Anybody might." And to himself: "I'm doing pretty well." He was, though Pearl's face did not relax.

But then the train entered the tunnel, and there was darkness. Not a lamp in the carriage. Of course not. You couldn't have everything. A ridiculous but genuine fear seized Alan. Mercifully hidden from Pearl's eyes, he clenched his teeth savagely and clutched at the seat, nerves still

ungoverned. As he grew accustomed to the darkness and recovered his poise a little, he thought with intense resentment: "No lights. Wood to sit on. And what springs! And this is how they fulfil their contract to carry me first-class, and after they've damn nearly killed me! . . . I must control myself. I mustn't be silly. The idiots are doing their best. . . . But what a best! And what efficiency in ticket-collecting!" The superior and charitable philosopher in him was not very prominent now.

The tunnel, less than a mile in length, was endless. He knew that it was not the Mont Cenis, but it seemed to him to be ten times longer than any Mont Cenis. Then, just as day faintly glimmered again, there was a sudden violent grinding of brakes. Alan gave a cry of terror; he could not help it. He sweated in spite of the cold. He was in an anguish of fear. The carriage jolted, and stopped with a hideous thud. Absurd, this fright! The train groaningly, and with an apparently desperate effort, resumed its course. Yes, absurd!

"My God!" he thought.

Still, he contrived to dwell on the comforting idea that he had at any rate got clear away from the accident and would soon be in Modane, another world, a sane, safe world, a world free from the horrible contagion of disaster. He hoped that in the tunnel-magnified racket of the train Pearl had not heard his cry of panic. The light slowly grew

as the train toiled slowly up the slope. No Pearl was sitting opposite to him. She had mysteriously vanished.

The train came out of the tunnel. Alan heard a murmur of talk from the far end of the coach —perhaps forty feet off. Then he could just see the top of Jack's hat moving about the horizon of the wooden divisions of the semi-enclosures. Jack must be standing up; and had he not been tall even his hat would not have risen over the horizon. Alan could catch no word—not that in his unsuspiciousness he felt curious. Then he saw Jack's hand in gesticulation. At last he heard Pearl's voice, incautiously loud:

"Well, that's my opinion, and I shan't alter it."

No more! Spoken in a cold, inimical, intimidating, utterly uncompromising tone. Their talk was apparently ended. The train rattled and shook. The snowy scenery crawled past the windows. The cold was as ruthless as Pearl's voice. Alan divined with certainty that those two had been discussing the future, their own future. And he was gravely shocked by their lack of heart. Youth was a terrible thing. They had been through a frightful experience. They had fringed death itself. He himself was at any rate injured, if not seriously. Others had been seriously injured, one very seriously. And it was all nothing to them. They were arguing, quarrelling, hating, on a subject which had no immediate actuality.

They thought of no one but themselves, and of naught but their trifling affairs. And Pearl's tone—used in the midst of the great upheaval! Callous, they were!

The reality of their conjugal life together was suddenly revealed to him, and he was staggered by it. Where was charity in their scheme of existence? Had they no sense of the value of lovingkindness? Had they no guiding philosophy? No, they had not. They were young animals, yapping, barking. Worse, they had probably been yapping and barking from the very start of the episode. Finding themselves unscathed, they had resumed at once their altercation, and continued it in the intervals of so ably helping the victims, including himself, Alan. Their egotism was fantastic and incredible; it was revolting. He remembered now the peculiar tone of Jack's first reference to Pearl. "She's as right as rain." A strange lack of heartiness in the words. They had been hating one another even then! (True, he had praised her later.) And when they were tending and cosseting him, and fixing him comfortably in this relief train, he had noticed in them a certain constraint, a forced benevolence, towards both himself and one another. He had attributed it, quite wrongly as he saw now, to the emotion caused by the peril of the accident and by the physical weakness of their parent. Their duplicity estranged them from him; but it estranged Pearl more than Jack, for Pearl was the stronger

and the wiser, and she was a woman, part of whose mission it was to soothe and to create peace.

And then, with a swift leap of his soul, he entered into their souls. He became them. He reproached himself for uncharitableness. He understood. He saw their quarrelling, as an epical, heroic struggle. They were fighting terrifically for ideals which each believed passionately to be of fundamental importance, for the happiness of all their lives, for their salvation from everlasting misery. Neither of them could yield, or ought to yield. To yield would be treason. The fight must continue. If it ended only in mutual destruction, it must continue. It was rooted in the secret, unchangeable nature of things. He himself was negligible. His career was almost over. He belonged to the past; while they were the contentious forces whose interlocking would shape the future. What a simpleton he had been to imagine that a passing incident like a railway collision, unrelated to any ideals whatever, could or should influence their respective attitudes! He admired them for a pair of mighty protagonists. And he was very unhappy.

He shut his eyes to deceive them, because they were coming towards him. Their filial duty! Pearl came first—Alan distinguished her footstep. After a few moments he opened his eyes, simulating the end of a doze. Yes, she was looking at him. Jack followed her and looked over her shoulder.

Both steadied themselves by the woodwork of the carriage. Alan smiled.

"Hullo!" he muttered sleepily.

It might have been a scene in a play performed by members of some amateur dramatic society. Alan was extremely self-conscious.

"All right, Dad?"

"Yes. Perfect. If my forehead isn't bleeding again." He knew that his forehead was not bleeding. Pearl had previously washed it, from a teacup, and bound it, and it felt quite comfortable. He was merely continuing the performance.

They both moved nearer to him, dutifully concerned for their elder. Pearl lightly touched the handkerchief-bandage.

"No! It isn't bleeding."

"Good," said Alan. And to himself: "What a farce this is! Why in God's name can't we all be ourselves?"

"I think perhaps he ought to be lying down," said Pearl, glancing with deference at her enemy husband.

"Oh!" Jack answered impulsively. "It'll be very hard, this seat will." He corrected himself in an instant. "But whatever you think best, dear."

The last word was the last straw to the back of Alan's self-control, which broke.

"Oh, hang it!" he cried out, half in disgust and half wearily; not the sedate, respect-inspiring elder, but an impatient young man totally unaffected by the calendar. "Don't I tell you I'm all right?

Doesn't it strike you two as rather comic, you pretending for my benefit there isn't anything up between you? D'you think I can't see you're having an awful row while I'm sitting here? If you're having one, have it, and let's know the worst." Assuredly his nerves were seriously disorganised. He was ashamed, but he could not repent of his haste, even to himself. "Do try not to be ridiculous," he finished.

Jack flushed; his protruding chin advanced; his fanatical eyes shone darkly. As for Pearl, nobody could say whether under her rouge and powder she blushed or did not blush. But her face hardened ominously, beyond misinterpretation. They were implacably divided, those two savages. Alan saw clearly in their demeanour the seed of the disaster, inevitable, which he had feared and which would for ever shame the family. He saw the trouble steadily growing; nothing could check it; it would grow and grow until the final separation—and the dreadful justifying of scandalous tongues. He had been acting; they had been acting. The drama was begun, in which the characters were playing for their lives. The air itself was charged and vibrating with the invisible currents of that drama.

"There! There!" Pearl soothingly murmured to him: a brilliant actress.

## CHAPTER XXIV

# THE FRONTIER-RESTAURANT

THE shabby waiter in that particular restaurant was like all the waiters of the world in the possession of one psychic quality—the gift of missing the eye which was trying to catch his. There was no malice in the waiter; he did not even know that he had the gift; and it was uncanny, the fashion in which time after time his wandering eye just failed to meet the eye of the hungry man. Half a dozen other customers were eating their fill. And Alan was incapable of calling out in a loud voice even in the frowsy restaurant of a frontier railway-station. He did murmur appeals and protestations at intervals, but the waiter had no ear for murmuring.

Though his nerves had mutinied again, Alan was resigned to his fate. He had permitted himself gradually to sink to the status of a living package, dominated and moved about by persons of superior vitality and volition. It was easier so. At the beginning of the long loop of line by which Modane was approached, the relief train had halted and stayed. It had stayed and stayed. Apparently it had struck roots deep into the frozen

earth, and would remain fixed for ever where it stood. Nobody complained, because there was none to whom to complain. And was complaint justifiable? In sending down a relief train, in actually starting it back and getting it within a mile and a half of its destination, the railway company had already accomplished such a marvel of enterprise that no fair-minded person could decently reproach it on account of a hitch when the journey was as good as finished. Moreover, every minute the train was expected to resume. At the end of a hundred and thirty-five minutes it had indeed resumed—and puffed into the station in the grand manner.

Then Pearl had conducted her father-in-law to the restaurant, sat him in a chair at a small table, ordered for him what she considered he ought to eat and drink, snatched two rolls of bread off the counter, and hurried away saying that she would return soon. Where and why she went Alan was not told—you do not give information to packages—but he supposed that her business was connected with enquiries about registered luggage, obviously a matter of tremendous importance. He looked at his watch; the day was half gone, somehow; the hours had been tedious, and yet time had acted up to the proverb: dawn had hardly occurred before night would stoop over the landscape. At any rate, thought Alan sighing, another stage of the journey was achieved. And he thought:

"Yesterday morning I was thinking that I

hadn't lived—as old Lucass for instance has lived. I've lived now. After this I can never again say I haven't lived. Damn those two." He meant Jack and Pearl. He was still very sad, sadder than he had ever been. "I wonder if Jack's telegraphed to his mother. He said he would. It's something that this place is warm. That stove's red hot at the top." The heat of the room was beatific for him. He stared around. The incredible came to pass. The waiter caught his resentful, appealing eye, and gave a jump as though a strong current of electricity had shot through him.

"Monsieur?"

"How long will my food be?"

"At once, monsieur."

"But you said that when it was ordered," Alan positively snarled.

"Eh, monsieur. What would you? This morning one has had such a demand!"

"But you knew hours since about the accident."

"Eh, monsieur, as for that . . ." The waiter's face and tone said: "The accident—that does not concern me. I accept no responsibility. Officially I know nothing about it. I am a waiter in a restaurant."

But he added, the humanity in him relenting:

"Monsieur is not seriously injured? No! I will hurry them in the kitchen." He strode off.

"How the devil do you know I'm not seriously injured?" Alan threw the savage question soundlessly after the waiter's disappearing back.

He noticed from the demeanour of one or two lunchers that they were ready to be sympathetic and inquisitive. The bandage on his forehead no doubt attracted them. But he gazed defensively down at the tablecloth, spread with everything necessary for a meal except the food. The inhibition against chatter had not been lifted. He admitted, gloomily, that he was indeed not seriously injured. A scratch. Nothing more. Unless of course a splint of glass was buried in his temples. His inconveniences were merely nervous and physical fatigue, and heavy forebodings as to the future of the sacred family.

The waiter reappeared, without any tray.

"The engine-driver is dead," said the waiter.

"Dead? Dead?" from several voices. A woman cried.

"Five children," said the waiter, and departed, after a glance at the unfed Alan.

"Strange!" thought Alan with acid humour. "They're always orating about race-suicide in this country—if I'm still in France—but when anyone's killed sure enough he leaves a widow and five children."

This news was a sort of culmination. It spoiled the accident. Or rather it gave reality to the accident, which till then had been simply a spectacular smash of no interest because it had sent not a single soul into the next world; a smash to have been described in five casual lines of the newspapers had it not involved one of the great inter-

national luxury expresses. Alan had previously heard that the only injured man in a critical condition was the driver of the engine of the train de luxe. The man ought to have been safe at Modane, where his night's task was scheduled to finish. It was his life's task that he finished at Modane. . . . A bit sentimental, that! But true —and how else should you phrase it? The man had a home somewhere, hopes, regrets, ambitions, plans, a past, a future, good qualities, was of a certain experience and maturity, was highly skilled —or he would not have been put in charge of a precious train de luxe, scores of lives entrusted to his good judgment and technical equipment. And he was entirely innocent, and he was dead. Simple! And his widow would soon know she was a widow, if she did not already know it. Alan could hear the woman telling her five children: "Your father is dead," and the younger children crying and not quite understanding why they cried.

At this point two things happened, almost simultaneously. The waiter brought Alan's food and wine, setting it down proudly as one saying: "I have done the impossible for you." And Mr. Lucass entered the restaurant. Not the old Lucass whom Alan had known on the previous evening, but a far older one, indeed the ruin of the original Lucass, unkempt, dirty, his once glinting blue eyes without lustre and dead, an enfeebled little antique of ninety or so. Mr. Lucass glanced about the room, dazed.

Alan was instantly transformed into a member of the younger generation. He forgot not merely the engine-driver and his own troubles, but all his fatigue. His faculties were suddenly marshalled and sharpened. He ceased to be a package. He realised that he had something to do. Instead of being succoured, he had to succour. Yes, and he was happy. He jumped up from his chair; and if any persons present had known Jack, they would have seen Jack's youthful spryness in Alan's quick movements. He went straight to the old man and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come along here," he said firmly and cheerfully.

The old man looked at him, bewildered for a moment.

"That you?" The old man's voice shook. "Yes, they did say you were in here. What's that on your forehead?"

"Nothing," said Alan. "Take no notice of it. Come and sit here."

He masterfully led the old man to the chair from which he had just risen, and forced him into it. Mr. Lucass beheld food, and his eyes began at once to brighten.

"What's this?"

"It's for you," Alan answered, and scraping a chair across the tiled floor, sat down opposite to his charge. "I've got it all ready for you. Eat some of the veal first, and then you must have a drop of wine. Waiter!"

The waiter, having provided Alan with every-

thing necessary for a meal, was now of course attentively watching in close proximity.

"Monsieur?"

"Bring me another glass and some more bread first, and then another plate of this veal."

"Yes, monsieur."

Alan poured out wine into two glasses, and munched bread, and immediately felt that he could eat all the bread in the world and that bread was the finest of all comestibles. Mr. Lucass ate, slowly, and then quickly. He drank at one gulp all the wine in his glass, which, however, through Alan's foresight, had contained very little.

"Better eat before you drink much," Alan warned him benevolently.

"I suppose you're wondering how we got here," said Mr. Lucass.

"No," said Alan. "I wasn't. I'm full of my railway accident." He smiled. "I must tell you about it." He monopolised the talking.

"I'm managing this rather well," he thought complacently. "It's the kind of thing I *can* do. . . . I hope the old fellow hasn't been in an accident too. Looks as if he had. How the devil did they manage to reach here like this?"

Mr. Lucass's presence had in fact an air of being magical. Alan had left the fated couple in the middle of the night on the wet platform of a village station a thousand miles from anywhere. And in the man walks to the restaurant at Modane! Mr. Lucass's age was now momentarily falling. It fell

like the mercury of a thermometer removed from the sun into the shade. And that too had an air of being magical. Alan, aware of a sudden disconcerting weakness within, and grievously changing his mind as to the supremacy of bread, envied the old man his veal and his renascent strength. He stopped talking. The waiter arrived with a second meal, which Alan ravenously pounced upon. Silence.

"I expect you drove here," Alan resumed at length. "But how on earth far is it? How did you do it in the time?"

Mr. Lucass replied:

"I'll have some cheese, I think. No. We got a goods train."

"A goods train!"

"It was the wife did it. You know how much French *she* speaks! And me none. But the guard spoke English, and he enjoyed talking English. They always do. You see, the wife was very anxious about the registered trunks. She was determined to get to Modane. She said the stuff would be held up there, here, and it seems it was."

"Where is Mrs. Lucass?"

"She's in the customs here."

"But has she had anything to eat?"

"Not she. Didn't want anything. Lives on her nerves when she's got an idea in her head."

The old man related how they had travelled in a brake-van, sitting on a bench, for endless hours, as far as St. Michel-de-Maurienne, where the train

ended its journey, and how they had been shunted violently at short intervals, and how they had not slept, and how he was bruised all over, and how Mrs. Lucass was too restless to stop at St. Michel-de-Maurienne, and how they had first heard of the railway accident there, and how it had made Mrs. Lucass more anxious than ever to reach Modane, and how they, or rather she, had contrived to hire a Ford car (with a left-hand drive and a hood but no side-pieces), and how they had bumped uphill through snow all the miles to Modane, and how Mrs. Lucass had insisted on his coming into the restaurant, and he had yielded in order to save her from getting hysterical. And how, and how, and how! A heroic pilgrimage. An Odyssey.

"Nobody killed, I hear," said Mr. Lucass.

"No," lied Alan. "Some injured."

"That daughter-in-law of yours all right then?"

"Oh yes. Funny thing, her husband—my son Jack, you know"—pride in his tone—"flew over from the north of England to Aix-les-Bains, and joined our train there. And he wasn't hurt either. Not a scratch."

"Flew over? What d'he do that for?"

"Oh!" said Alan lightly. "Wanted to catch up with his wife. Youth! Youth!"

"Some lad!" said the old man grimly.

"Some lad," Alan casually agreed, with affected paternal modesty. "I say. You must have had a hell of a time." He reconstructed the horrors of the Lucasses' incredible journey. And all for trunks!

"I did. Nearly finished me. The joltings. And no sleep. And then that motor-car drive. Why! It's all mountains. Never stop climbing. And what a road! Good thing we had a chain on the back-wheel. If we hadn't we shouldn't have got here. I don't mind telling you I gave the chauffeur a thousand-franc note. Opened his eyes. Bit of luck I happened to have it on me. I tell you Mrs. Lucass is a go-er when she starts. Nearly finished me. But not her. Not her. She's younger than I am, if she *is* an invalid."

"Women have no sense of danger," Alan observed sententiously.

"No sense of danger! I like that!" exclaimed the old man, offended, but showing restraint born of complete confidence in his position, and using the calm voice of one accustomed once to exercise moral authority among his fellows.

So far Alan had avoided any reference to the hag-beauty's amazing and exasperating performances in the night as a prophetess of evil determined at any cost to act on what she absurdly believed to be her intuitions. Convinced that the old man had logic and commonsense in his soul, he had thought that the chief sufferer from the whims of the hag-beauty would be feeling rather ashamed of them and would prefer, as the natural guardian of his wife's dignity, not to have them mentioned. He now got his first inkling that he was expecting too much from human logic and commonsense, and he saw that thoughtlessly he had used the very phrase

most likely to weaken logic and commonsense in the old man.

"Considering," said the old man, "that if it hadn't been for my wife's sense of danger, we should have been through what you've been through——!"

"Quite!" Alan agreed. "Of course you were fortunate. And of course Mrs. Lucass did insist on getting out, and if she hadn't insisted you wouldn't have been fortunate——"

"I should think not," the old man interrupted. "We might both have been killed, or at any rate injured. And at the best—the shock of it all, to her . . .!"

"But you don't mean to say your idea is that the two things are connected?"

"What two things?"

"Why! Her feeling about an accident, and the fact that there *was* an accident. You don't mean to say that there was anything in it except pure coincidence?" Defying prudence, still unable to believe that with such a man as Lucass prudence was in the least advisable, Alan stuck to his point.

"I don't know," answered Mr. Lucass with a touch of acerbity. "Do you? All I know is that I'm nearer the grave by a long sight than you are, young man. That kind of thing doesn't seem so simple to me as it did when I was your age. . . . Who does know? Anyway my wife was right. She was right. And you can say what you choose.

But why do you say women have no sense of danger?"

"Speaking generally," Alan tried weakly to soothe. And he thought: "Senile. Can't think straight. . . . But is he senile? Can there be anything in it?" The old suspicion recurring that he had had in the train.

"'Generally' be damned!" Mr. Lucass took him up. "You were speaking of my wife. You weren't speaking generally at all. And I ventured to say that if you'd been saved from the accident in the same way as my wife and I were, you wouldn't be so cocksure either."

Some constraint between them.

"Perhaps not," Alan murmured still more soothingly.

The constraint brought about a short silence, which Mr. Lucass broke by an affirmation, ardent, exalted, devout:

"My wife is a marvellous woman—though it's me as says it!" By the colloquial phrasing and the lighter tone of the supplementary last words, Mr. Lucass intended to correct the perhaps exaggerated solemnity of the first, also to dissipate the constraint which he felt that he had caused.

"She is! She certainly is!" Alan responded with eager friendliness.

Alan was uplifted. For the second time the old man had made him young. But after all the old man was even younger. It was plainly apparent

that the old man still had a passion, and a violent passion, for his marvellous hag-beauty; a passion which age could not chill; a passion strong enough to affect his mental faculties and bend his mind. The passion had gloriously survived his wife's slow transition from beauty to ugliness, her maladies, her nerves, her tantrums, her tyrannies, her senseless preoccupation with such trifles as trunks, her eternal knitting, her injustices, her infernal tongue, her ruthless disregard (as on that morning) for the infirmity of his years, her fiendish obstinacy in having her own way. And it had survived his physical decay. He ought to have been as cold as a fish, as indifferent as a mummy. And here he was behaving like a lusty youth! The thing was magnificent, enheartening, inspiring. Alan in those hours related everything to the case of Jack and Pearl, and he instantly related to it the extraordinary phenomenon of the old man's devotion. If Jack and Pearl loved, as they surely did —Jack had proved his love and Pearl had admitted hers—no difficulty nor conflict could part them; and all would be well.

Mr. Lucass sat back in his chair and went fast asleep. His features relaxed, and he looked old again. Like many old people asleep, he had a frightening resemblance to the corpse of himself. The other lunchers, having begun simultaneously, were ending simultaneously, and there was stir and noise in the restaurant. The waiter was receiving money. But Mr. Lucass slept on undisturbed.

Alan gazed at him, pitifully. What had been magnificent was now touching, pathetic.

The door opened, and Pearl came in. She had completely renewed her appearance.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, seeing Mr. Lucass. "Well, it will do him good. We want your trunk-key, please. Has to be opened. They *say* there'll be a train on quite soon." Alan drew forth a chain of many keys.

"Oh! Which one?"

"Not quite sure," said Alan feebly.

"Do you think you could come with me to the customs?" Pearl asked. "Now you've eaten. Might save trouble. If you could come now. You can settle up here afterwards. Oh yes, *he's* all right. Just tell the waiter."

"I'll come," Alan agreed, feeling that he was a package once more, and not ill-content to be a package.

## CHAPTER XXV

## OLD LOVE

THE Custom House, when Alan and Pearl went into it, was like all railway custom houses: a dirty floor, scarred wooden benches protected here and there from complete destruction by metal bands, foul bare walls whitewashed at some date distant in the past, electric fittings apparently improvised at about the same date and precariously surviving from year to year, baggage smart and frowsy, large and small, open and closed, thrown down at all angles in heart-rending disorder, a few curt prohibitions in two languages, slatternly porters maintaining an attitude of careful impartiality, slow-moving examiners like judges ready at any moment to assume the black cap, anxious and aggrieved passengers (a thin crowd of tired white faces) whose fears choked back the lies they wanted to tell—and the spirit of autocratic bureaucracy brooding invisible but felt. Boulogne over again, but more acute.

"Do you know what that man said to me?" shouted the Brooklyn lady, accosting Alan with imperfectly controlled gestures. "He had the insolence to say that I ought to think myself lucky

to get my baggage at all! The insolence! After the shameful accident we've had! I shall certainly complain to our ambassador."

Other passengers looked at her as at a heroine courageous enough to utter the universal sentiment, hoping timidly, however, that the examiner did not understand English.

"Yes," said Alan.

He knew that he could never say anything except Yes or No to the uncompromising coarse creature. Why could not people make allowances for human nature? Did it not occur to them that vast organisations worked and must work in separate compartments. These custom-officers had to remember only one thing—that goods possibly liable to duty were leaving one country to enter another country. They had naught to do with accidents, injuries, fatigues, sleeplessness, death. Not their business, all that! They knew well enough that passengers were lumping all officials together and consciously or unconsciously blaming even custom-officers for their misfortunes, and they were consciously or unconsciously resentful of the gross injustice to themselves. The accident had affected *their* nerves too; for passengers were not the only persons to have nerves. And further, they were determined not to incur the risk of reprimand and jeopardise their careers by omitting any duty laid upon them by the rigid rules of the high gods of the Revenue. What would happen to them if in reply to some inquisition of a superior

in a distant central office they excused themselves: "But there had been an accident"?

Thus and thus thought the absurd Alan, with his distressing faculty of putting himself imaginatively in the place of others. He suspected that he was exaggerating the position, but he did not care, because he detested the arrogant Brooklyn lady. He might fairly have tried to put himself in her place. But he would not try. With a masculine indifference to individual instances of hardship, he callously charged her in his mind with confusing two entirely unconnected issues. Could the muddle-headed egotistical woman give one single reason why a railway accident should justify her in evading the laws of a great power which was as innocent as herself of responsibility for the disaster? She certainly could not. None of these folk had imagination. He alone had imagination.

He then thought:

"I'm getting self-righteous, critical,—nerves! I must overcome them! There're quite enough nerves knocking about this show, without mine."

He saw Mrs. Lucass nearly at the other end of the room. A wardrobe trunk stood open on the floor beside her; she had pulled a lot of wool out of one of the drawers, which she had not properly shut. The wool lay on the bench in front of her. By the wool was an open hat-box. She had taken a hat from the hat-box and was putting it on, with unintentionally comic persuasive movements of her

braceleted wrists and bony, ringed hands. The hat was grotesque and she was grotesque.

"I suppose you haven't got a mirror?" she said sharply in English to the examiner behind the counter.

He shook his head, signifying that it was useless for her to address him in an unknown language. Then she bent down to the trunk, drew out another drawer, and after much rummaging found a hand-glass. She looked at herself and at the hat in the glass, grimacing. The examiner, who had been yawning, smiled cruelly, and winked at another examiner, who winked back. The scene was in its way dreadful, the demeanour of the examiners revolting. The ungainly hag-beauty was hideous to the view. She was the ugliest and most preposterous old woman in the world. Alan was ashamed for her. He wanted to remove her into some secret chamber and there magically render her beautiful and dignified so that she might be worthy of the passion for her which burned in the heart of an otherwise sane old man. And yet somehow she had dignity, throughout all the egregious, self-centred performance. And perhaps she was changing her hat in order to flatter the eye of the adorer. You could not be sure. In some matters women were never old; they could not age. And she well knew that she had an adorer and a slave in her husband, and the tremendous fact influenced all her actions.

Did Pearl feel similarly about Jack? Was Jack

capable of the old man's unbounded devotion? If so, there was hope. But the younger generation, the formidable, incomprehensible, hard younger generation—you could be sure of nothing in regard to it. Alan's glance happened to meet Pearl's. She had seen what he had seen, but her face remained insensible. She did not smile, nor frown, nor show sympathy. Not a sign of any answering emotion. Possibly she deemed the extraordinary antics of the old girl to be beneath her august notice. An implacable young lady, beyond human weakness.

Alan lowered his glance, and followed her rather uncertainly to the bench where the assembled belongings of the Frith-Walter family, some of which had already been enquired into, stood displayed under the guardianship of Jack and a porter. He knew that he must greet Mrs. Lucass, but he felt self-conscious, averse to greeting anybody, and decided to leave the encounter to chance.

Mrs. Lucass, aware of the presence of more people near her, suddenly turned and looked, and saw Pearl. She hesitated a moment and then, abandoning her luggage and her mirror and her loose wool, moved impulsively to Pearl. She totally ignored both Alan and Jack, had no eyes for them. She stared at Pearl who, to Alan's momentary astonishment, gave her a warm smile. Pearl had ceased to be an implacable young lady beyond human weakness. Mrs. Lucass was obviously excited. Her bracelets jingled, her newly

donned hat was shaking, and also it was somewhat awry on her head.

"What a mercy it was our luggage happened to be in the front part of the train," she said, "otherwise we might never have seen it again!" She giggled for half a second. "I—I——" Her voice got out of control. Then her hag's face grew distorted, and tears fell from her eyes as from an overflowing spring. She wept without the least attempt at self-control, without shame, without any thought of spectators. She was no longer a woman and a man too. But she was a little girl, as well as a deeply wrinkled, hideous hag. Her sobbing intimidated the whole room. Not a smile nor a nudge anywhere. Pearl's face lost its smile. Everybody was uneasy.

And then Mrs. Lucass jumped at Pearl, assaulted her with a violent hug round the neck, kissed her violently, perhaps hysterically, and clung fiercely to her. Pearl's face was sympathetic; she did not recoil. Alan had a lump in the throat. Mrs. Lucass put her head on Pearl's shoulder and kept it there. The blonde face of the young beauty, and the dark, seamed face of the old hag (with the hat above it all crushed) were very close together, and the contrast between them was at once dramatic and pathetic.

Pearl's demeanour was benevolent, daughterly, motherly, quite calm. Alan would have expected her to betray, in her superficial tranquillity, some resentment at this wild exhibition. But it was not

so. Nor was she in the least self-conscious, though every other face in the room showed self-consciousness, as well as compassion. Indeed she put up her hands to the old woman's head, moved it gently, and softly kissed her, right on the mouth, that all might see. Fresh light on Pearl for Alan! In the swift revelation he understood the qualities in her which had known how in a few minutes on the previous evening to inspire such violent affection and worship in the historic wreck called Mrs. Lucass.

"I couldn't have borne it if you'd—you'd b-been injured, my dear," the old woman openly blubbered through her shaking sobs. "You're too lovely. Your husband's been talking to me. What a m-an, what a man you've got for a husband, my dear! Fl-ying to you like that. He told me you weren't hurt, nor him either. And I was so glad. But it was just seeing you all of a sudden like this that made me really feel how t-errible it would have been if you *had* been hurt. Just seeing you. Oh dear! What an old fool I must be to be going on this style! I'll stop."

Pearl still said nothing, but she smiled again. What dignity (Alan thought) the girl had! What a wife! What a husband! Nothing sinister, surely, could mar the relations of the wondrous pair, who had chosen each other by a unique natural instinct that could not delude itself.

Mrs. Lucass, gathering her wits and establishing self-command, withdrew from Pearl and flopped

down on to the bench, out of breath. Her nerves had at last given way after the ordeals of the night and the morning. The paroxysm was brief, but it wasn't yet quite over.

"Where's Ernie?" she cried, addressing no one in particular. "I must have Ernie."

"Mr. Lucass is asleep in the restaurant," said Alan. Mrs. Lucass glanced angrily at him, without seeming to recognise him.

"Fetch Ernie at once!" she loudly and imperiously enjoined the world.

Alan murmured desperately to Jack:

"Run and see if you can bring him."

The next moment an official entered the custom house and with excusable elation and pomp announced that a special train would very shortly depart for Turin, Genoa, Pisa and Rome. Excitement in the Custom House at these prodigious tidings, an excitement which stirred even the examiners out of their professional nonchalance! Alan jingled his keys. Pearl left Mrs. Lucass in order to help him. And then Jack returned to the Custom House with old Mr. Lucass.

"Quick, Ernest!" the hag-beauty called her command to him before he could reach her. "There's a train. See the porter shuts those things up properly, and put the wool in your overcoat pocket, and don't leave the mirror out."

Mr. Lucass came near her, gazing at her face and her thin, dyed hair.

"What's the matter, lass?" he questioned, apprehensive.

Mrs. Lucass gazed at him with her close-set eyes blinking—and made no answer.

"Give me my spectacles," she said at length. While he was searching in his pockets for her spectacle-case, she stretched her arm, and took his handkerchief from his breast-pocket, and wiped the tears from her face. Clumsily he drew the spectacles from the case, and she placed them clumsily on her nose, and peered closely into his face. Then, at the evidence of his fatigue, new tears shone in her eyes.

"Darling!" she whispered tenderly. Her voice was charged with a fierce emotion. Mr. Lucass fidgeted. "We'll sleep here to-night—at Modane. No more travelling for you till you've had a night's rest!"

"Oh no!" he protested. "I'm all right."

"I say we will sleep at Modane," she repeated savagely.

Only Alan saw the scene. Pearl had taken his key-chain and was bent down upon an obstinate lock. The rest of the company were absorbed in their own urgent affairs.

## CHAPTER XXVI

## TEMPER

DUSK was already descending on the station, slowly, surely. Alan sat in the wonderful train, which comprised sleeping-cars and a baggage-van, but no restaurant-car. The rumour was that a restaurant-car would be added to it at Turin. The Wagons-Lits Company had done marvels, producing magically a whole train, heated, out of a hat, with conductors and all complete. Rumour said also that the complementary train in the opposite direction — Rome-Boulogne — had been diverted to another route; and that the line would be cleared in another two or three hours for all traffic. Ill-natured rumour said that the authorities had provided the special train so expeditiously only because the succeeding train from Boulogne would be upon them in the night, before they knew where they were, and for their own sakes they wished to avoid an accumulation of trains and passengers at a spot like Modane. Jack was in the new compartment, fixing his father's rug on his father's knees and being generally attentive and soothing.

Suddenly the voice of Pearl, unseen, was heard in the corridor:

"Hullo, doctor!"

The doctor, an Englishman, related to her his deeds: in connection with a compound fracture, two simple fractures, concussion, slight hysteria, flesh-wounds—nothing really serious now, except the case of the engine-driver, which had gone past seriousness; of course, speaking privately, he had known from the first moment he set eyes on it that the engine-driver's case was perfectly hopeless; details of the engine-driver's case; the narrative finishing with an account of a short but perilously fast motor ride, the doctor being absolutely determined to catch this train, of which he had had news. Yes, he had not done much, but he had done what he could, and yes, he was a bit tired, fairly tired, but naturally as a doctor he was accustomed . . . etc. "You were very helpful, Mrs. Frith-Walter, I'm bound to tell you."

So he knew her name and everything. Indeed the two seemed to have become quite intimate. Pearl said little; the doctor did nearly all the talking. A breathless, excitable sort of a man, Alan judged. The suspense of waiting for the colloquy to cease and for the train to start was strangely trying to Alan's nerves. But already for half an hour the train had been on the very edge of starting.

"Well, I haven't had much chance to see after my own things. I'd better get busy. I'm in the next car. Conductor there says they're all right. Decent fellow, I fancy. Not like some of 'em today. Your father-in-law's no worse? Much

better? Good! Knew he would be. Slight shock —nothing else. You can make your mind *quite* easy. Au revoir."

Silence.

The train moved, stealthily. And the instant Alan felt the faint commencing vibration, his nerves seemed again to tighten with the fear of danger renewed. He must control them. There was no danger, but he hoped that the train would not permit itself any excessive speed. He could not bear speed. A most cautious moderation was what he insisted upon.

Jack looked out of the window, stooping.

"There's the old lady, waving." He meant Mrs. Lucass. He waved in response.

Alan neither stirred nor spoke. As the train cleared the station, the light increased; it appeared to be full day again. They were away. They were in flight once more from the contagion. They were a band of refugees, separated from the world, drawn together by a danger escaped. Alan had a peculiar feeling of intimacy and brotherliness with every passenger in the train. Pearl went by the open door of the compartment.

"Pearl!" Alan cried sharply, without in fact intending to call her.

She returned to his view. Her beautiful face had the old slight, perhaps ironical smile. She waited.

"Come in," said Alan. "Come in and sit down, won't you? Plenty of room for three."

"I think I'll just go to my compartment," said she, very quietly. "You and Jack can share this one between you."

With a single phrase she had raised the whole question of her relations with Jack. It was astounding, formidable, the effect on Alan of her remark. She and Jack, then, were surely in the midst of a rupture. And she was realistic; she was implacable. Could they not have had the decency, for the sake of their father, to postpone these terrible dissensions for a few hours? Could they not pretend . . .? No! Alan felt as if he was bound and shackled in front of the elegant creature. A railway accident was naught to her. Love and passion were naught to her. For she had an idea in her head, one idea. And she would fight for it, unscrupulous about weapons, unalterably decided to give not an inch of ground; evidently she dismissed the mere notion of compromise or temporising.

"Come in and sit down," Alan repeated, persuasively. "And let's be comfortable." Then his nerves betrayed him, and he added, pettish: "For goodness' sake!"

Pearl stiffened visibly.

"I'm rather at the end of my tether," she said coldly. "If you don't mind. You and Jack'll be perfectly all right here."

The idiot Jack had not enough wit to hold his tongue. Nervous also, doubtless, he must needs put in:

"I really think the Dad ought to be left alone to sleep if he can."

"Well, then, all you have to do is to keep quiet, if he wants to sleep," said Pearl, openly acid. And she slipped out of sight.

The train dashed into the long tunnel of Mont Cenis. Darkness. Electric light to be turned on. A deafening racket. Involuntarily Alan clung to the seat. Then gradually he relaxed. Jack shut the window and the door, and the noise became more bearable. The door opened. Pearl entered.

"Here I am," she said gently and sweetly, just as if half a minute earlier there had been no friction between them whatever. She sat by Alan's side, but a foot away from him. Jack was in the little window-seat opposite to them.

"Now just tell me exactly how you are," she said, leaning a little towards Alan, and touching his shoulder with her hand.

He was delighted with her, almost completely reassured about her and Jack. This charming trick of hers, of which he had had previous experience on the journey, of arriving unexpectedly in a compartment after she was supposed to have left it for good!

"Well," he answered, cheerful, uplifted, teasing, "if you want to know the disturbing truth, I don't feel so queer as I ought to feel, considering everything. I'm tired and I wish I was sleepy, only I'm not, but otherwise in spite of honest efforts I can't find anything the matter with me—except

nerves of course." Such was the influence over him of her new demeanour. He saw clearly into the mind of the young woman. She had repented of her hardness, her stiff coldness, and nobly she had returned to publish her repentance. "I myself," thought Alan, "could never have done it like that, all of a sudden. I couldn't have broadcast it. I could only have let it be known, bit by bit. In some ways 'they' are our betters. Anyhow she is."

"I'm so glad," she said. "I had an idea you were better, but I daren't be sure."

She smiled a quite original sort of smile. She half reclined on the long seat, exquisitely, elegantly. It was wonderful how she kept her elegance throughout railway accidents, custom-house harassments, and all such trifles. This was the enchanting creature who had nursed the old hating and hated hag, and been kissed and clasped and cried over by the hag. And this was the enchanting creature who had kissed his hand, Alan's. What had he done to deserve that impulsively bestowed honour, in one sense the greatest honour he had ever received, the honour that had made him proudest? Whatever happened to him in the future he would never forget the light pressure of her lips on his fingers. And she was Jack's. She had Jack in charge. She had a supreme responsibility to Jack, and she was not the young woman to ignore it in the smallest degree. She was a creature of rare character. She certainly had more sagacity

than Jack, more poise, a truer estimate of the world than Jack, who, as she had indicated before, was ingenuous and without a proper appreciation of the real nature of his environment. Jack was the babe unborn, she the woman aware. She still smiled. What an alluring display of charm, a display surpassing even that which she had so suddenly given to Alan in the restaurant-car on the previous night! The tears, the dew-drops trembling and shining in her eyes, then! Memorable! He glanced at Jack, whose face had not softened. Which lack of elasticity on Jack's part hurt him.

Pearl said:

"As you're so much better, I think I may as well say what I have to say. You'll have to know it some time soon, and the sooner the better. I can't bear to have things hanging over me. I always want them to be settled and done with. Jack and I have decided to part. We've had it all out. In fact we've had it all out more than once, haven't we, Jack?"

Jack, after a half-savage gleam of astonishment, nodded glumly, all the vivacity vanishing quickly from his face.

"And we've decided to part. I told you he'd never give way and he won't. I told you, didn't I? We're quite friends. So now we all know where we are." She gazed straight at Alan with the same benevolence as before, and her tone was kindliness itself.

As for Alan, though he was astounded, an

inordinate fury so quickly succeeded his momentary stupefaction that the change in his bearing startled himself just as much as it startled the other two.

"Well I'm damned!" he exploded, with uncontrolled violence.

Pearl's reaction was to sit up straight.

Both she and Jack were guilty, but she was the guiltier because she had spoken and because she would not wait. Moreover, she had deceived him, deliberately. She was not kindly. She was two-faced. She had been playing a part, with her damnable mask of kindliness. Why had she done it? She was incredible. She was untrustworthy, a cat, a vixen, a she-wolf, a tigress, without scruples, without bowels, implacable in egotism. He had sometimes suspected that the calm Elaine did not really care for her, and the calm Elaine was right.

The dull, subdued, reverberating racket of the endless tunnel intensified the drama proceeding in Alan's mind. The electric light, illuminating halves of faces, making dark, crude shadows on faces, glinting on brass fitments, lit the drama strangely. The dim lamps of the tunnel, gliding regularly by, punctuated it with eerie commas. There they all were, within the earth, crawling perilously through the earth, millions of tons of earth and rock over them, the snowy peaks of the Alps thousands of feet above. All was majestic and terrible, except themselves, and they were pigmies. And she had chosen this moment to announce a preposterous decision. Damn them! Curse them! Damn them! Curse

her to hell! Damn the self-sufficient girl, with her too-precise, somehow superior intonations! She had proclaimed disaster, ruin and shame with the silly ease of a damned silly hostess pouring out a cup of tea at a tea-party. Alan thought in the back of his brain:

"I've never been like this before. I've lost my temper. I don't remember losing my temper since I was a boy. I'm the man famous for always keeping his head. I ought to have kept my head. But I don't want to keep my head. I'm justified in not keeping it. Why should I keep it? I'm jolly glad I didn't keep it. Do they think they can do as they please while I smile and thank them for their blasted high-flown wisdom?"

He exulted in a new and marvellous sensation. Never had he felt such vitality. "This is nerves. This is the result of the accident. Well, let it be nerves!"

He gazed around. Jack—("Worships me, does he? Well, I'll give him something to worship!")—Jack was looking at the table, his lower lip hanging. Jack was discountenanced by the unprecedented phenomenon of his father's demeanour. Pearl rose quickly and cautiously, moving towards the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd better leave you." Her voice was uncertain.

"Sit down. How dare you say what you did and then try to slink off? Have some decency.

Sit down, I say." ("She kissed my hand, did she? I'll let her know whose hand she kissed!")

Pearl sat down.

"She may be a strong, powerful individuality," he thought with bitter grimness, "but now she's up against a stronger, and she'll soon find it out." He had taken control of the situation—in an instant. He had lost his temper; he was, however, using his wrath victoriously. His righteous wrath might be a symptom of racked nerves, but he had quite ceased to be nervous about the swaying movement of the train. Kids! Infants! Playing clumsily, idiotically, with their lives, with his, with Elaine's! Grotesque in their egotistical self-conceit.

"Now!" said Alan, as though the situation were a team of only half-broken wild horses and he were gathering up the reins, as though he had come down from Mount Sinai and the team were quivering at the foot thereof. "Now!" He repeated the word more quietly, being quickly appeased. "What does all this mean? You must excuse me if I'm a bit disturbed."

"Oh, please!" said Pearl, eagerly, forgivingly, perhaps a little patronisingly. "After this morning —and the night—of course—of course. I *quite* understand."

He was nettled, but he managed to hide his resentment: he could be as calm as she or as anybody.

"Yes," he said, with a superior, burning iciness. "We've all been through something, you as well

as I. And no one's in a fit state to see things clearly and in proportion. And yet——"

"I'm perfectly all right," said Pearl. "And so's Jack."

"But even you've had no sleep," Alan countered sarcastically. "I suppose that doesn't affect you."

"It doesn't really," said Pearl. "What's a night's sleep? I always feel frightfully well after I've been up all night. One does, you know. I've heard the same from doctors."

"Possibly. Let's admit that your judgment is as sound today as any other day. What then? Don't you think that in a business of this kind it wouldn't have been a bad plan to talk to your friends before coming to any hard-and-fast conclusion? Your mother, for instance? Jack's mother? Even me?" He was bitter, but he estimated that he was not trying her too hard.

Pearl replied, unruffled:

"But you see our point is that it's a business that doesn't concern anyone but ourselves."

Curious: the estranged husband and wife seemed to have constituted themselves a league against their families and the world!

"Oh!" Alan observed, very blandly now, very dispassionately. "So that's the point, is it? Well, I'll make just one request, my dear Pearl. Let's leave it all for the present. Naturally it must be discussed. Two families are concerned anyhow. *You* may be at the top of your form"—he actually

smiled—"but I'm not. Let's sleep on the affair —I know that's an old-fashioned suggestion."

"But I doubt if we shall be together tomorrow," Pearl objected.

"Now please oblige me, I—do—not—want" (Alan separated the words to emphasise them) "to discuss it now. There can't be all this breathless hurry. Surely it won't be beyond our combined ingenuity to arrange to be together tomorrow, or the next day. Anyhow I'm not equal to discussing the thing now with either you or Jack." He had absolutely decided to say no more and to listen to no more. He would impose himself upon them.

Then Jack, recovering himself somewhat and looking up, said:

"So far as I know there hasn't been any definite decision to part."

Jack's chin!

## CHAPTER XXVII

# POLITICS

PEARL said in a cheerful, unperturbed, unresentful, absolutely confident tone:

"But my dear Jack, you've told me I don't know how many times you wouldn't alter your plans—and as a matter of fact I told your father last night I was sure you wouldn't—and I told you quite definitely that if you didn't we couldn't go on and I wouldn't go on. What could be clearer?" She put on her faint, ironic smile, which always disquieted Alan.

"But I didn't say we couldn't go on," Jack replied. "It takes two to make a separation."

"No, it doesn't. It only takes one," Pearl retorted indulgently.

They were both apparently quite ignoring Alan's instant request for surcease from discussion.

"You see," said Jack, in a new tone, and to nobody in particular, "what I say is this——"

"I don't think you can say anything you haven't said already," Pearl stopped him. "Besides, your father doesn't want to talk now. I believe he's not so well as he thought he was."

"Yes," Alan corrected her. "I'm perfectly all

right. I may as well hear all there is to hear. I'm inclined to agree with you it's best to get it over." Then to Jack: "What did you say?"

Pearl's precise enunciation and kindly tone seemed to have added to her spoken words:

"Your father is an old man and must be humoured —he isn't so strong as we are."

Alan did not care to be treated as an old man or an enfeebled man. He was not old. He tightened his muscles and sat up straighter. The older generation could match the younger. (Think of Mrs. Lucass!) He was determined to display the same elasticity of mind as his son and daughter-in-law. All nonsense, he admitted to himself, what he had said about his not feeling equal to a discussion just then. Of course he was equal to it.

Moreover he had a renewed sense of the mighty battle which those two had been fighting—for a principle, for their careers, for their whole lives. He was inspired and uplifted and thrilled by the conception of the battle. It was a great phenomenon, one of the most significant and important of all phenomena; he saw it as symptomatic of the age. And the two protagonists were so powerful, so appealing in their youthfulness, so attractive —Jack quivering like a racehorse, elegant as a racehorse, Jack with his defiant chin and his pure, idealistic face, Jack his own son, begotten of himself; and Pearl, elegant too with her finely-tended complexion, her smart costume (though the oat-

meal costume was a little stained now), Pearl with her pronounced facial angle and the long straight nose of a self-centred yet agreeable woman, Pearl the splendid creature of his son's choice. He defied but he admired them. He would be their peer, more than their peer. He had the experience, the wisdom, and the wit to manipulate the pair of them, no matter how obdurate they might be under his moulding hands.

Jack hesitated.

"Here. Have a cigarette," said Alan lightly to Pearl.

"No thanks! Don't smoke."

"Really?"

"Really." She gazed at him.

Alan was flattered. A few words from him, then, had frightened her off a dangerous habit. She would take two hundred cigarettes back to England with her. Yes, he could influence people. But what character the girl had!

"Out with it!" Alan encouraged his son gruffly but benevolently. His tone was all the apology he meant to offer, or could bring himself to offer, for his recent outburst of temper.

"Of course," said Jack, rather nervously smiling, "you've never heard much about my views, have you, Dad?"

"Not your mature views," Alan replied, and in spite of a real desire to be completely serious as well as sympathetic, he did not quite succeed in avoiding an ironic note—that was because he was

by so much the oldest and wisest person in the compartment.

Jack, however, seemed not to observe his father's naughty playfulness; humour went past him. A grave defect in him, thought Alan.

"All I say is," Jack continued, "something's got to be done about things. Things generally, I mean. They're all wrong. I mean all wrong for the under-dog. Everybody knows that. No one can deny it. You can't educate the under-dog and then expect him to behave as if nothing had happened. You may say things were always wrong for the under-dog, and perhaps more wrong before than they are even today. I agree. But that makes no difference. The under-dog understands now how wrong things are, and he believes they can be altered. He hadn't used to understand. And there's another point. *Our* consciences have been wakened up. No one's easy in his mind about things. It wasn't like that forty years ago. Our lot didn't trouble themselves then. I expect they took everything for granted. 'The poor we have always with us' and so on. All very well, that—then! I daresay a lot of 'em say even today 'The poor we have always with us.' And believe it honestly, too. But what do you mean by 'poor'? Poor's such a vague word. Would anyone today say 'The underfed we have always with us'? Or 'The one-roomed tenement we have always with us? Father and mother and growing-up daughters and sons and

so on sleeping and eating and washing and washing their clothes all in one room—we have always with us'? Why! There isn't a man in the country dare stand up and say that, and I don't care who he is. That's one reason why there's a Labour Party. You may say that all parties want to alter that. Yes, in a way. But the Labour Party wants to more than any other party. And the Labour Party knows more about it than any other party. And it's got a better right to try. The Labour Party really wants to alter it. And it's entitled to all the help it can get. I intend to help. Pearl thinks I'm inconsistent. I don't. I simply can't see it." Raising his eyebrows, as if to emphasise his feeling about the incomprehensibility of the attitude of other people, Jack paused and stared around.

"Bit stuffy in here," said Pearl. "Shall I open the door?" She put the question in the softest deferential tone, the tone of one anxious for the general welfare. Alan nodded, and Pearl quickly opened the door, and they saw two persons pass along the corridor.

But Alan somehow in secret objected to both her word and her deed, seeing in them—whether justly or not he could not decide—a symbolical unsympathetic criticism of Jack's statement of his case. Jack had impressed him. He was astonished at Jack's development. He had never till that moment thought of Jack as anybody in particular. He now saw him as somebody, as a

potential force in the world. He noticed that Jack had a fine speaking voice, and he began to picture him as an orator, holding and swaying public meetings and being loudly applauded. The boy's manner was naïve, but it was saved by his passionate sincerity. Though the boy might be wrong, might be blind to all sorts of important considerations, he certainly had a positive power which would reduce to nothing a thousand negative faults.

Those phrases, "The under-fed we have always with us," etc., were extraordinarily picturesque and striking. And they must be accepted because, even if they could be answered, nobody, as Jack had said, would dare to attempt to answer them. And were they answerable? They made Alan uncomfortable. He hated to feel uncomfortable: he disliked and feared an excess of uncompromising honesty: he feared what might happen to himself if the habit grew of uncompromising honesty; but he personally could not answer the phrases. Had Jack invented them, or had he appropriated them? He wanted to know, but could not bring himself to commit the crudity of bluntly asking. Yes, he was afraid of his son's simplicity and sincerity and directness, which induced in him a mood of uneasy social guilt and of responsibility evaded. But he was intensely proud of the surprising Jack. He understood at last Elaine's pride in Jack. Damn the lad with his "The one-roomed tenement we have always with us"! Thirty hours

earlier all had been well with Alan, who had been dedicating himself to enjoyment in security—work accomplished, pleasure earned, not a care, nothing but rewards. And here was the boy creating an enormous mess in the family and about to create a still more enormous mess in a stable and conservative country! The prospect of the future was worse than disquieting; it was terrifying.

Pearl continued to smile.

"Go on, Jack," she said nicely. "I want Father to hear everything."

Was there disdain in her calm accents? At any rate Alan was glad that she had said "Father," not "your father," for it showed that she was still willing to accept a share of his fatherhood. "I'm catching at straws," he thought. "That's what it is."

"Not much else, is there? No use me repeating myself." A tone of weariness in the boy's voice was succeeded by a lighter tone and a bright smile aimed straight at Pearl.

"But your reply to the inconsistency charge, and so on," said Pearl.

"Oh! That!" Jack shifted his glance from Pearl to Alan. "I'm being asked night and day why I don't give up my money. Why should I? I wouldn't mind doing it if I wasn't married——"

"Ah!" breathed Pearl with a tranquillity that disconcerted Alan. "That's new."

"—if I thought it would be any use. But it wouldn't only not be any use—it would do harm.

Poverty's a cancer. Supposing a doctor was trying to cure a cancer case and somebody said to him: 'If you haven't got cancer yourself you'd better go and get it before you start in, otherwise you aren't consistent.' What should you say to that?"

"Another deadly phrase," thought Alan, and wondered why he should have invited the boy to be so devastating.

"What the Labour Party needs more than anything is money," Jack proceeded. "You can only fight poverty with money. I'm going to live reasonably—Pearl can always have all the money she wants from her mother, who has far more than she knows how to spend—and use every cent I can spare for politics—the campaign. If I did get rid of my money, whom should I get rid of it to? Of course you'll say the Labour Party. Well, I mean to use a lot of it for the Labour Party, but I'll use it in my own way; I can use it a darn sight more usefully than the party could use it. It wouldn't amount to half a drop in the party funds. Besides, if I'm to give up my money so as to be poor like the poor, why shouldn't I give up my baths and be dirty like the poor, and my grammar and my accent and talk like the poor, and stick my knife in my mouth like the poor? The whole argument's too absurd, and what's more, it isn't genuine. It's nothing but a catchpenny argument intended to put me in an awkward place and queer my pitch with the party if that's possible. Isn't as if the

place wasn't awkward enough as it is. No!" At this point Jack's voice rose suddenly as he added: "It's not a genuine argument. And anyone with any brains knows it isn't genuine. It's claptrap."

"Of course it's claptrap," said Alan, but not aloud. He regretted that the boy should have raised his voice. Passers-by in the corridor, those ever-restless creatures who infest trains and whom even railway accidents cannot chasten, might overhear him; they might stop, stare, smile; and this possibility presented itself to Alan as the most humiliating of all misfortunes. To attract attention by undue noise: deplorable! He agreed with the boy's reasoning, but the word "demagogue" came into his head.

"You see," Pearl remarked, with soft destructive sweetness, "Jack can't believe that anybody who differs from him is really sincere. It's a pity, but there it is and I know he can't help it."

Alan felt her looking at him, and he avoided her eye. In two seconds the situation had grown too difficult for him. He was not controlling it in the least. As for cleverly and superiorly manipulating the callow youngsters as he had meant to do—he had not even begun to set about it. Pearl's short speech was terrible; the quiet sweetness with which she uttered it was more terrible. She was a dire young woman. Dire. Jack moved strangely in his seat. The racket of the train, hushed though it was by the closed windows, exasperated Alan's

ear. He felt that if the train did not soon emerge from the interminable reverberating tunnel, and the electric light soon yield to the dusk of nature, he would lose sanity. . . . Nerves!

Then Jack slipped startlingly out of his seat, stood at full height above Pearl, and exclaimed with passion, reckless of publicity:

"Darling, *why* were you so angry because I flew over to catch you up?"

The situation with incredible swiftness had now taken an entirely new turn, which none could conceivably have foreseen.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

# OTHER POLITICS

OF course, another example of nerves. Despite their boasting, these youngsters were in the same state of semi-hysterical excitability as Alan himself. (He smiled secretly.) Another consequence of the accident.

Well, the accident was having its uses. In a way he was glad of the accident. It had the effect of bringing hidden matters to the surface, of intensifying emotion and discouraging suppressions. It might, it probably would, influence the whole future. It had certainly increased his own capacity to appreciate the strange spectacle before him in the compartment. (He still felt some of the glow of his own display of temper.) The accident was, now, exposing the realities of the situation between Jack and Pearl. There was more in the situation than politics. For a moment Jack had seemed to be leaving the point at issue; but perhaps, in a deeper sense, he was keeping to the point, even getting closer to it. Perhaps his instinct was more logical and orderly than the superficialities of reason.

The lad had sinned against the British code of restraint. But to do so in the presence of his

father—what a proof of confidence and trust in his father! Never had Alan felt more intimately and proudly paternal. The lad was not afraid to be natural in front of his father. Was Pearl capable of rightly judging the beauty of their relations? He affectionately admired Jack. The ingenuous face, the pure, passionate eyes. The magnificent freedom from self-consciousness! The elegant dignity! Race! His own race!

He remembered suddenly and vividly a reference, more than one reference, of Elaine's to their son's fierce hatred of injustice. He, Alan, had not particularly noticed the quality for himself; it was the knack of dreaming women to notice these profounder things. Here was an instance of Jack's hatred of injustice. The lad thought that Pearl had been unjust to him about the flight. She had taken it in the wrong spirit. The sense of injustice had lain active within him, possibly for hours and hours, and at last it had burst forth articulate. Why had his pursuit of her angered her? He was demanding justice from Pearl; he was not suing for it; he was demanding it. What a man for a woman! Love and passion in his gaze! His ardour was surely irresistible.

Alan had the feeling that Pearl was on her trial; she was being tested. His opinion of her would be decided by her reaction to the ordeal. He did not care what her reaction might be, if only she would abandon her exasperating, detached calm. He watched her, ready to condemn. She did not

abandon her calm. She looked up mildly at her husband, and said in a very quiet, soothing tone:

"Why? Why was I angry at your coming after me? I wasn't angry. I never said anything."

"I know you didn't say anything. You wouldn't say anything, though you knew I wanted you to. I'm sure you were angry. Only you hid it. Why should you be angry?"

"I wasn't. Still, I do think a woman ought to have some freedom. You're free to go where you like. Why shouldn't I be? Why should I be chased—all over Europe? . . . If you really wish to know." She kept her gaze on him, steadily.

"Considering I only wanted to talk to you," said Jack, rather sullen. "I had to talk to you."

"Considering I only wanted to talk to Mother!" Pearl smilingly retorted.

"Of course if you look at it like that, I'm sorry," said Jack, gloomy.

"It's quite all right. And I wasn't angry."

"I should have thought you'd have been a bit pleased—me flying so that I could have another talk with you."

"So I was pleased. It's childish somehow; yes, childish; but it's flattering. I wouldn't deny that for a minute. But something else in me wasn't flattered. I'm telling you just how I felt. I know you always like me to be frank."

A kind of appeal in her voice, as it were the expression of a desire to have his good opinion of her.

Jack was touched. His face seemed to hover over hers.

Alan was uncomfortable. The feeling of being one too many in the compartment most seriously irked him. He had the idea that were they alone together Jack would seize her and finish all argument for ever in the illogical, fraudulent way that women adored—or were supposed to adore. "I'd give anything not to be here," he thought in distress. He might have walked out of the compartment, but he was mysteriously fixed to the seat. He imagined the flower itself of love ready to blossom in many-coloured magic between Jack and Pearl like a firework in a night sky. He imagined the wonders and marvels of tenderness. . . . But no! He could not move.

"'Childish'? 'Childish'?" Jack murmured, repeating Pearl's word reflectively, discontented, critical.

"Oh well!" Pearl exclaimed, sweet, but imperceptibly impatient at his cavilling. "Any adjective you please, Jack. But do believe I'm not angry. Do! Besides, what does it matter? We weren't on that subject at all. In fact honestly I'd quite forgotten it. It hasn't anything to do with the real point." She turned suddenly to Alan. "Has it?" in a tranquil and pleasant tone, exactly as though common social politeness had prompted her to draw him back into a conversation from which he had been ungraciously excluded. She was terrible, with her perfect aplomb. She was a devil. But what arts!

The firework had failed to germinate and squander its loveliness. Alan could not speak. His limbs, his tongue, even his brain were all equally paralysed. He blinked stupidly again, thinking of himself: "I'm sullen just like Jack was." At length he said:

"Real point? There's no real point. There's a lot of points. It's a regular area." He tried to brighten. Gave a weak smile. A poor attempt!

"Rich or not rich," Pearl blandly continued, apparently not in the least discouraged by the spleen of her men. "Keep your money or don't keep it. What's that? If Jack stands for Labour he's going against all of us. He'll make us all ridiculous. I've said so already. I've said it to you, and I shall keep on saying it. It's that that upsets me. I could never swallow it. Never! When you feel ridiculous, something's wrong. You may argue till all's blue, but there it is. Even if we didn't have to copy the Labour people and live like them, and have them at home, and so on and so on—at first I thought we should have to, but I admit we perhaps needn't—but even if we didn't, we should be just as ridiculous, possibly more. Everybody would laugh behind our backs. They might say how splendid it was of Jack, and all that, but they'd smile to themselves just the same. I don't care for any argument—all argument's in the air, it's all abstract—but this isn't abstract." She turned to Jack. "And you can't frighten me by saying I'm not genuine, though I don't think it's quite nice of you, Jack. I'm just as genuine as

you or anybody else. What do I mind about parties? I mind about people; and besides, parties are only people. I'm thinking of my family and your family, and all my belongings, and the way I was brought up, and the way you were brought up. And I say that that isn't selfishness on my part. No, it isn't. Not what I call selfishness. I belong to a certain class, and so do you. And I think that if anyone belongs to a class in his bones, he oughtn't to go out and try to ruin it. And that's what Labour people are after—ruining us. I'd like to see justice for Labour, but I want to see justice for everybody. Labour people don't. Jack does. Oh, yes! But Labour doesn't. It wants everything for itself. What a mess they'd make! What a mess! Especially of us. You'd see! Do you imagine I don't understand politics because I'm a woman? Why, politics are as easy as A.B.C. There's nothing to understand. Anyhow, if I was in politics I should fight for my own class, not against it."

"My dear," said Jack solemnly. "You'd have a class war then, would you?"

"Now there you are!" She looked at Alan. "There he is. That's Jack. He's pretending to himself there isn't a class war already. But there *is* a class war. And there always was and there always will be. As if all politics weren't class war! And if there isn't a class war, who's going to begin one? Not us. It's Labour that's out for a class war. Not that I care so much about class. What

I care about is my family, and yours too. When you really get down to bedrock, the family's the most important thing."

She gave a little nervous cough.

"Quite a speech," she said, and looked up above Jack's lofty head and smiled at the ceiling, and then at Alan. She was moved by her speech, and rather ashamed of being moved, for she had meant to remain perfectly calm.

Alan saw vaguely the flaws in her case, which involved the reduction of all home politics to a sinister game of snatch-as-snatch-can, and the inevitable permanent defeat of the under-dog. He might have seen the defects clearly, but he deliberately would not. For Pearl had captured the whole of his sympathy by her appeal for the institution of the family. The family for him was more sacred than anything else in the social structure. It was the main article of his religion. And, though she had slighted marriage to him, how she had defended the family! She cared tremendously for the ornaments of existence; she was without doubt luxurious. But her preoccupation with powder and rouge, the cut of frocks, manners, the arts of elegance, did not prevent her from having basic ideas about life.

She had thought. She had used her brain; she had a brain worth using. She extorted full respect. She was an equal. He admired her intensely. He said to himself, "I am very fond of this girl." And now she was very magnificent in her con-

trolled, powerful emotion. She was one of the most wonderful spectacles he had ever witnessed. She had quickened and ennobled the fundamental vitality of the compartment. She had gone deeper and risen higher than Jack with his resounding abstractions, his limited vision, his cruel fanaticism. There was in her mood something of the Wordsworthian grandeur. . . .

No, he must not be unfair to Jack. If Jack's vision was limited, so was Pearl's. And it might be argued, too, that Pearl also was a fanatic. But the boy lacked humanity, in which Pearl abounded. Jack burned with a fiercer flame, Pearl with a richer glow, than the other. Alan himself, while his instinct was on Pearl's side, wished to judge impartially between them. And, as gradually he allowed himself to do so, he saw that he was judging impartially because maturity had cooled his fires. The younger generation surpassed him in the heat of passionate conviction. He envied them their certainties. Why should either of them ever yield? He would be compelled to despise them for yielding. Neither of them must yield. Disaster was ahead: but there were finer things than the avoidance of disaster, things which were not too dear at the price of disaster. Disaster might be splendid—it would be. He was almost ready to welcome it. The pair, and Pearl specially, had uplifted him to a higher plane of being; the battle was on that plane, not below. The battle was endless; a decision simply could not be conceived. Even the des-

truction of all life would not be a decision—only a shirking by the Creator. The endlessness of the battle, the unanswerableness of the famous riddle, alone rendered life worth living. The train, sweltering in the subterranean arcana of the terrific mountain, obstinately rasped and rattled its forward way, bearing the battle along with it. And in Alan's heart happiness and misery were fused into a single sensation transcending the sum of both.

"Well," said Jack, with hard urbanity, glancing down at Pearl. "I don't see it. I'm sorry."

He looked at his father and, retreating from Pearl, resumed the little seat in the corner opposite Alan. He said no more. His face said no more. He was a piece of marble, from which Pearl's arguments had dropped like flung dry earth. The couple were fixed in opposition.

Yet Alan felt that even now a passionate emotion was straining to escape from its marble prison in Jack and surge upon Pearl and dissolve her and drown her, and that Pearl too was hiding a tenderness which, could it elude the jailer her brain, might melt marble and perform a hundred other wonders in order to coalesce with Jack's. At the same time Alan knew that the miracle was impossible. Intellectual pride, spiritual pride, energised by the profoundest instincts—pride was in command, and nothing could dislodge it.

A tunnel-lamp, flitting by, showed more palely than the previous one. The next minute the train was out of the tunnel and running through a station

with the name of Bardonnecchia. Another land! The early evening seemed lighter here than at Modane, though half an hour had passed; but this impression was only the effect of contrast after the darkness of the tunnel. Already the train was sliding rapidly down slopes, all sense of effort gone. Pearl rose and, standing at the little table, contemplated the windows, completely ignoring Jack, who was almost touching her. The views, however, were on the other side of the carriage, framed in the wood-work of the doorway. Nobody spoke a word. Now and then, between hills, brief glimpses of a red sunset stain on the western clouds! The train curved eastwards, skirting a foam-patterned stream. It crossed the river, again and again. It sped through short tunnels and over viaducts. It was in a gorge, peaks on either hand. Grey-green trees. Rocks. Tiny and forlorn dwellings in the solitude. Then a little fortressed town, perched on a height, came and vanished in five seconds. Then a broader valley arrived. Night was closing down.

Putting her hand on a clasp of the window, Pearl glanced enquiringly at Alan. Might she open it? He helped her with the stiff machinery. Jack did not move. She breathed in the tonic air voluptuously. Yes, another land, a different climate, southern, far softer, despite winter and dusk and the still lofty height. Broad spaces to the south.

"The plains of Italy!" Pearl murmured.

What she saw was mist, not the plains of Italy, but its effect on her was the same.

Nothing else was said. Alan noticed tears rising in her eyes. He had seen them there on the night before the accident. And she had held them, then. But now they were less obedient to her will.

"I suppose that art-student woman would have said something very technical about 'values' in this landscape," she remarked. (The first reference Alan had heard to her former companion in the original train! And for himself he had not once thought of the woman, who had doubtless preceded them in an earlier train.) Pearl tried to give one of her ironic smiles; and failed. The tears slipped unruly down her lovely cheeks; some of them dripped on to the table over which she was bending. She had ceased the effort to maintain appearances. She sobbed. "Even the youngest of us," thought Alan grimly, in the conceit of his age, "can't stay up all night and go through railway accidents and break up their lives and their husbands' lives, without paying for it in nerves. She's all gone to pieces at last." But he dared not attempt to comfort her, lest worse should happen.

"Oh, damn!" she exclaimed sharply, angry with herself. "Jack, help me to shut this window."

The window was shut, by the two men. Pearl sat down and wiped her eyes, not furtively, and sighed. The blinds were drawn. There was nothing but the train, the interior of the compartment. Silence, save for the dulled roar of the train. Alan felt that he had been brought near to the very roots of life, and that disaster had beauty.

## CHAPTER XXIX

## LEAVING THE TRAIN

GENOA. The train journey was over for Alan. The train had run through the ravine separating the city from the port, with glimpses of the lights of lighthouses, and of many steamers and trams, and come to a stop at the curving platform of the Piazza Principe station. Alan had said a strange, self-conscious good-bye to Pearl, who was going on to her mother at Viareggio, and, Jack attentively watching over him, had got down the steep steps from the carriage. Pearl had scarcely risen from her seat. No beds had yet been made up in the compartments. Jack had wanted to accompany her to Viareggio—only two or three hours further on, but Pearl would not agree. She had said: "I *prefer* not," with finality. Also: "Jack must see his mother. She'll be anxious, and of course he must see her, and the sooner the better." Jack was taciturn.

Alan noticed that at parting husband and wife shook hands with an affected nonchalance imitating the casualness of acquaintances. From the platform he glanced at the windows of the carriage. No Pearl there to smile and wave them on their

way with her affection! Nor had Pearl charged him with any message for Elaine—but no doubt in the nervous stress of those moments she had merely forgotten the customary courtesy: excusable. Alan nevertheless regretted the omission. He stood on the platform, rather confused and forlorn, while the strong and masterful Jack dealt with a porter in an Italian which was inferior to Pearl's.

A small crowd as usual on the platform, but apparently no special interest in the train; no sign of official interest. Every passenger in the train had probably seen death close, had lived through a shattering experience; yet nobody waiting on the platform seemed to care or even to know. Genoa might never have heard of the great accident. Turin had displayed symptoms of excitement, but somewhat faint. Alan was resentful at such atrocious neglect. He had an idea that the Mayor and Corporation of Genoa ought to have been present to condole publicly with the victims of misfortune. . . .

The car would have to be found which Elaine was to send for him from Arenzano, ten miles or so westward, her favourite spot on the Italian Riviera, the spot which by much frequenting she had made hers, and which she would refer to as if she owned it. But would the car be there at that hour? Complications. Happily Jack was at hand. Without Jack . . . Then he caught sight of the magical, astounding apparition of Miss Office. She was talking vivaciously, but with

seriousness, to a uniformed representative of Cook's, and her eye was searching all the time. She saw her employer and hurried towards him. He felt the irrational guilt of a man who is hiding, and must hide, terrible secrets, for which he is entirely unresponsible. He simply could not be natural. But he was intensely, ineffably relieved to behold Miss Office. How like her to be so miraculously there to meet him! Her expression was perturbed, concerned, but it had all its old smiling helpfulness. Before she had spoken, or even reached him, she had become a cushion for his abraded sensibilities. He was very glad that the doctor had visited the compartment while the train halted at Turin and had substituted for the bandage round his forehead a much neater and less noticeable dressing of cotton-wool, cyanide gauze, and sticking-plaster. The bandage had given to his wound a most misleading air of importance.

"And how come you to be here before me, young woman?" he asked cheerfully, taking her ungloved hand.

"Oh! I've been here for hours—four hours," said she. "They sent us round—I forget the route—but we got here first, you see. My word, I did have a turn when I first heard of the accident. You aren't *really* hurt then? That Cook's man there's been awfully nice. He's Italian. He showed me about it in the Italian afternoon paper. And the other accident too, near Toulouse. Your name wasn't among the injured. I *was* glad.

Especially for Mrs. Frith-Walter. Directly I got here I got a car and drove to Arenzano. I thought I ought to break it to her. But she'd had your telegram then, and she was just coming over to Genoa. So we came back together. I got rooms for you at the Nettuno. Mrs. Frith-Walter said you always stayed there when you came to Genoa. Besides, I knew of course. She wouldn't hear of your motoring to Arenzano to-night in the dark. It isn't far, but I must say the road *is* bad. She'd be here now to meet you, only this train's come in nearly an hour before they said it would. She *will* be disappointed not being here at the station to meet you. I only came so early because I wanted to be sure. I suppose it was awful, the accident. I've never been in one myself; but I can imagine it." Miss Office was talking more than usual, and faster, and more loudly. Excitement, naturally. "That on your forehead, Mr. Frith-Walter—it's not——"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. A bit of glass. Bled a bit at first."

"But were you stunned?"

"I believe I was—at first; but I was soon all right. Yes, it was something of an experience."

"Well, you *were* lucky. I mean—you weren't lucky to be in the accident. But seeing there was an accident, you were lucky it wasn't any worse. I *am* glad. Oh! Mr. John! Mr. John here too?"

Jack had joined them. They were being jostled.

The porter waited for instructions, a collection of small baggage at his feet. He was ignored. Jack shook hands, silent, with a stiff, preoccupied, urbane smile.

"Didn't you know Mr. John was here?" Alan clumsily enquired. He was muddled now, scarcely knew what he was saying.

"No, I didn't. Mrs. Frith-Walter showed me the telegrams. One of them said about Mrs. John, but nothing about Mr. John. Unless I was in too much of a state to read them properly."

"How did you sign those wires, Jack?" Alan enquired, still more clumsily. He knew that two telegrams had been sent.

"I signed both of them in your name, Dad," Jack curtly answered. "Thought I'd better."

Alan thought in frightened apprehension of the explanations that lay before him. He must consider carefully how to phrase them to Elaine.

"And Mrs. John?"

"Mrs. John," said Alan. "She's going straight on to Viareggio to see her mother."

"Oh!"

Just that sole monosyllable betrayed the secretarial delicate sense of the existence of something equivocal, dubious in the situation.

Miss Office added:

"Of course Mrs. Meadowes must be frightfully anxious. She's at Viareggio, is she?"

"Yes," said Alan. "Mrs. John was going to stay with her there for the New Year."

"Oh, I *see*!" said Miss Office brightly, as if trying to show them, and herself, that the situation was not in the least equivocal, after all.

Alan's apprehensions about the immediate future increased. His imagination was working, and he began to realise more acutely the appalling nature of the oncoming difficulties. In a few hours at the latest, perhaps within the next hour, he would have to acquaint Elaine with the inconceivable fact touching her son and daughter-in-law. Elaine was tranquil by temperament, but he was afraid—he was afraid.

"And what now? What now?" Jack demanded, grim man of the world.

"Well——" Alan murmured.

"I think, Mr. Frith-Walter," said Miss Office, "if you went straight off now, you'd be at the hotel before Mrs. Frith-Walter leaves. I'm sure you would. And if you'll give me the luggage-ticket I can stay here and see to your trunk and bring it along. That Cook's man will help me. But it's just as you like."

"Yes," said Alan, hating a definite move, but as it were borne forward on a mysterious current.

He produced the baggage-check and handed it to the faithful Irene.

"Yes, this is it," said she. "I remember the number." The extraordinary creature seemed to be just as perfectly at home at Genoa, where she had never been before, as at Victoria itself. "You aren't so awfully late, you know," she gently

laughed. "Only twelve hours, about. And considering. . . ."

To Alan months had elapsed. And it was odd to see Miss Office still alive and utterly unchanged.

"And you, Jack? What will you do?"

"Well, I'll follow. I may have some trouble here because you see I haven't got any ticket. I ought to have seen to that at Turin. I'll be responsible for all this small luggage. Don't you trouble about anything."

Plausible (thought Alan), but the lad was dreading the encounter with his mother. Or was his idea to return to Pearl?

"There's the way out," said Miss Office, pointing. "You go downstairs first. You have your ticket, haven't you? There are lots and lots of taxis outside."

Alan moved desperately away. The next moment he perceived that a porter had been thoughtfully sent after him with his suitcase. One of Miss Office's fine shades of efficient secretaryship.

## CHAPTER XXX

## ELAINE

"ELAINE!"

Alan gave the call nervously. The rather over-illuminated room into which he had been shown was empty. A large, shining, very clean, pale room, with two beds in it, side by side and close together. Two counterpanes had been folded away and the beds turned down for the night. Alan pulled off his overcoat. He touched a pillow, a sheet. Heavenly whiteness, softness, purity! To lie in one of those beds seemed to him to be a celestial prospect of physical sensations surpassing any that he had ever experienced. An inner door was open. He passed through the doorway, calling again:

"Elaine!"

Bathroom, long, narrow and lovely. It had been used. Bottles on the glass shelf above the lavatory basin. A familiar dressing-gown hung up. Exquisite domestic, feminine disorder. Bath taps marked "C" and "F". To have a bath! To slip into the soothing, laving water! To abandon himself to the cleansing caresses of the water! Paradise. . . . Elaine appeared at the door oppo-

site which led from another room beyond. She started.

He beheld her as though she had risen from the dead, as though he had not expected ever to behold her again. Tall, slim, pallid. Mother of an adult son, of a Parliamentary candidate; and no doubt she looked the mother of an adult son. But Alan still saw in her the girl that he had married. For she had kept her figure, and the rather flattish contours of her pensive face were scarcely changed. No rouge on her lips, but a little powder on her face and the somewhat desiccated neck.

"Oh, Alan! How—Oh, Alan!" Her low, soft voice vibrated quite unusually. Pathetic! Touching! That was what she was. It was as if she, not he, had escaped death in the night. "How did you—I was just coming. I'm all ready except my frock."

He took her. She was one of those who have to be taken. Nonchalant in love, infinitesimally responsive, and not always acquiescent she was. But from her the faintest response was thrillingly significant. He kissed her again and again, not twice in the same place. He could kiss easily and naturally; and he knew how to handle her, having spent over a quarter of a century in acquiring knowledge and understanding of her. How youthfully soft the skin of her shoulders. He clasped her tightly, so that she could not move. Weak, he was a Hercules compared to her. She tried to push him away. He would not be pushed.

Her desire was to look at him. He let himself be pushed. With her frail hands on his tweed shoulders she gazed at him She was gazing at the plastered place on his forehead.

"It's simply nothing," he said.

She put her hand gently on his forehead, just above the wound. Her hand was cold and damp; "*moite*,"—he thought of the French word for it. He had never felt her hands cold before. She was indeed moved. "I didn't really know her till this moment," he thought, and gazed down the long vista of his intimate, conjugal, habitual life with her, which became mysteriously romantic. He gazed into her face, and at once guessed that she had left her lips unrouged, because to her strange, subtle sense of fitness, rouge would have been unseemly for the solemn encounter at the railway station; he was capable of these divinations.

"Oh, Alan, I was so frightened."

"Did you hear of the accident before you had the wire?"

"No."

"Well, then! . . . You knew I was all right." He thought: "If you'd seen me holding on to the corridor and the carriage all coming to pieces, you'd have been frightened then!"

She questioned him for details of the accident. She wanted to afflict herself. That was it. But he wilfully understated everything, made light of it all.

"Of course," he said, "every time they shoved

the brakes on in the train we came on by I felt my nerves a bit rasped. You know—sort of notion there was going to be another mess-up. But otherwise I was absolutely all right."

He did not convince her, however. She had no mind to part with her emotions so easily.

"Brakes! Oh!" she shuddered. Yes, she was tremendously moved.

"This is worth the accident," he thought. She alone had imaginatively comprehended. The effect of the brakes on him, for instance. The brakes had horribly jarred his nerves throughout the journey from the scene of the accident, right down to the final application of them as the train entered Genoa. He had mentioned the recurring ordeal of the brakes once to Jack; but Jack had only smiled with easy forbearance as at a foolishly frightened child; Jack had not comprehended.

Some difference between Elaine's state and even the faithful Irene's. The fact was, Miss Office had been a shade too placid, ever so little disappointingly placid.

"I must tell you," said he impulsively, but well aware that he was going out to meet trouble when he might have postponed it for a little while, "Jack'll be here in a minute or two."

"Jack? But——" She was thunderstruck.

"Took it into his head to fly over to Aix with that fellow I forget his name—friend of his, you know," said Alan, with forced lightness.

"To Aix! Fly over—in winter! I wonder

what on earth that boy will do next! Oh, my dear! It's too much. It really is. All coming together!"

Evidently she had a secret fixed conviction that Jack was a wild man, capable of the most fantastic madnesses. Evidently she had long ago grasped that disturbing fact better than Alan. And so Jack *was* a wild man! Alan said to himself: "My girl, you'll soon have to know what your son is doing 'next'!"

"But why should he go and do a thing like that?"

"Well, you see, Pearl was in the train. A fancy of his!"

"And was Jack in the accident?"

"Yes. Not a scratch."

"And Pearl too?"

"Yes. Not a scratch either."

"But you didn't say anything about Jack in your telegrams—you did say about Pearl."

"They weren't my telegrams. Jack sent them off. He didn't tell me what he'd said in them."

"But they were signed in your name?"

"I expect the lad thought you'd like to hear from me direct. See?"

"And why was Pearl in that train? You never let me know she was coming with you."

"I couldn't. Didn't know myself till I met her in the train. Sheer chance. She didn't know I was in the train, and I didn't know she was in the train. She was on the way to Viareggio to spend

the New Year with her mamma." Alan was now endeavouring to be sprightly. "Here, my girl. Put something on. You're hardly decent."

He snatched at the peignoir; and frowning, puzzling, absent-minded, she pushed her arms into its sleeves while Alan held it.

"Well," said Elaine, "I shall have something to say to them when I do see them." She smiled, wanly resentful against circumstance.

"You won't see Pearl. You'll only see Jack. Pearl's gone straight on to Viareggio. Same train, you see. No changing or anything. Thought her mamma would be anxious. Jack thought *his* mamma would be anxious. So they separated."

A brilliant piece of explanatory, plausible narrative. But Elaine's face did not clear. Women were always so damnably suspicious. The trouble was that in this case the woman was suspicious with cause.

"And where *is* Jack?"

"He's coming. He'll be here directly. He's fixing things with Miss Office at the station."

"Well, I do think Pearl might have stayed with Jack here just one night. Mrs. Meadowes would have understood. It couldn't have made much difference to her."

Egotism of the mother! Alan perceived that already Elaine was thinking more about her boy than about the boy's father. Natural! Proper! A sound instinct! Nevertheless. . . .

"I agree," said he. "But you know what people

are. Now *re* food. I don't want much. But I want a little."

"Oh, darling. Forgive me." Her tone changed. She was calm again, and contrite. "Come. Everything's ready. You poor dear! You're wonderful."

She took his hand and led him through another double-bedded room into a sitting-room, where a cold meal was deliciously laid for three, with flowers. The sight of it would have stimulated appetite in a dying man.

"This was for Pearl," said Elaine, indicating the third place. "Now it'll be for Jack." She rang the bell.

"You've got hold of an A1 suite," said Alan.

"I insisted on double-bedded rooms," said Elaine. "The single rooms are always so small. But there's a single room next to this. It was for Pearl. Now it'll be for Jack."

Strange, the effect of her repetition of the phrase!

Alan dropped into an easy-chair and surveyed the large, garish room.

"I think I'll have a bath first," he suggested.

A waiter came in, inhumanly detached from all railway accidents and domestic complications, bearing a silvern bowl of soup.

"You'd better have some hot soup first, darling," said Elaine, regaining her customary, tranquil tenderness. "It will do you good. And then you can eat after your bath. I'll run and get it ready for you." And to the waiter: "Soup for one, please. And will you open the champagne?" Smiling

encouragement at Alan, she hurried away into the bathroom. In a moment—the waiter had just gone—she reappeared, tying on a belt which matched the peignoir.

"Now is it nice? Is it hot? Let me see you take it. I've turned the taps on." She enveloped him in solicitude. "And then I thought it would be *better* to have double rooms. Because like that if you can't sleep and you want nursing, I can lie down on the other bed in your room."

Alan reflected:

"I wish to God this night was over!"

His apprehensions were countless. Her solicitude was infinitely precious to him: but he guessed that she was compelling herself to be calm and efficient, and that that which had to be would be.

## CHAPTER XXXI

# JACK AND HIS MOTHER

"I'VE sent down to enquire of the bureau whether they've seen anything yet of Jack," said Elaine, as she came into the bathroom for the fifth or sixth time, adjusting the frock which she had put on since the previous visit. She had been meticulously attentive to Alan during the bath, proceeding on the assumption that he could do nothing for himself. And in addition to being attentive she had shown in her tranquil and restrained manner a solemn passionate affectionateness. Alan had been made to understand that only one person in the world was capable of caring for him as he ought to be cared for, that Elaine was that person, and that in executing the rôle of attendant she was fulfilling her highest mission, living at her intensest vitality, and obtaining happiness for herself. Once, between the peignoir and the frock, she had kissed the plaster on his forehead as he lay in the water.

He almost forgot, in his luxuriating felicity, the prospect of woe that menaced them. He thought: "Would Pearl ever have done this for Jack? Or anything like it?" And he answered, No. The

older generation had somehow remained young, but the younger generation had always been old. "You are mine, you are mine!" Elaine seemed to be saying with every cosseting gesture. "You are absolutely mine. But I am even more yours than you are mine." The sense of the unreserved privacy of two was richly sweet to him. Elaine would not hurry. She revelled in her dominion over him as he lay at her loving mercy. She would not consult him, nor even ask a question, as to his clothes. She had opened his suitcase without a word to him. And without any apology she presented to him her ultimatum of clean linen, muffler, another pair of trousers, another waistcoat, dressing-gown, soft slippers. When he was dressed she handed to him his hair-brushes, and when he had brushed his hair she gave it a few modifying touches of her own. Then she took him by the arm back into the sitting-room.

"Now," she said, in a tone as if saying: "I'm sorry it's over, but you must eat."

In the sitting-room she rang the bell impatiently. After a long delay, the waiter came, and informed her that Mr. John Frith-Walter had been in the hotel some time, and had taken a room on the floor above, where he was at that moment.

"Well!" she exclaimed under her breath, and said to the waiter: "Please send up and ask the gentleman to come down here, and have all his things moved into the room next to here." She indicated the small room adjoining the sitting-room.

All this in an assured, politely imperious voice, without any reference to Alan.

Alan ate, and Elaine pecked, so that he should not eat alone. Alan ate in dread of Jack's arrival. He felt the catastrophe approaching. He pictured Jack's arrival. He could not credit that Jack would ever arrive. But everything comes to pass. The door at length opened, and Jack came in; fresh and neat as though he had just taken himself out of a drawer. Alan heard the growling of thunder round his horizon.

"Well, Mum?'

Elaine sprang up.

"My dearest boy!"

Jack put his arms about her. She let herself be kissed. There were a hundred reserves, a hundred unspoken enquiries in her fond, anxious glance. Alan, nervous, knew that she knew she had yet things to learn.

"Why didn't you come straight here?" she asked.

"I thought I'd better tidy up a bit first, Mum."

"And I haven't seen you for so long! And after all this, too!"

"Yes," said Jack, "a nice set-out, wasn't it? However—hello, Dad! Thought if I tidied up first I shouldn't have to leave you again. I was just coming."

But Alan guessed that the boy had still been putting off the encounter with his mother.

"I've got a room for you here," said Elaine. "Next to ours. I wanted us all to be together."

"Ah! But how was I to know that? However . . ." He sprawled on to a chair at the table. "This knife and fork for me? Good! Champagne, eh? Not a bad idea, Mum."

"So Pearl's gone on to Viareggio?" said Elaine. Her eyes added: "I think my son's wife might have stayed here for the night."

She apportioned to her son cold chicken, ham, and some salad. The boy absently poured out champagne for himself. They were together. Alan's entire family were together once more, for the first time since Jack's marriage. Nobody spoke. The constraint characteristic of near relatives.

Jack said suddenly:

"I suppose Dad's told you?"

"Told me what, my dear?" Elaine's suspicions were now in an instant arrayed in full order to battle.

"You've told her, Dad, haven't you?"

"What?" Alan demanded gruffly.

Jack turned to his mother.

"I've decided to stand for Parliament, Mum."

Elaine's face lightened with pride.

"Oh! I *am* glad. But your father and I had other things to talk about. So he hasn't had a chance to tell me."

"Yes. Labour."

Jack's tone was challenging—exactly the defiant tone that Alan had heard earlier. Alan saw that he had determined to bring the situation to its

climax, or to the first of its climaxes, with a rush. Perhaps the best course. But how alarming!

"What do you mean 'Labour'?"

"I'm going to stand as a Labour candidate. I've joined the Labour Party."

There it was—the first climax!

"You don't mean that!"

"I do. And I know all it means to you, Mum. But I've *got* to stand for Labour."

Swift tears glistened in Elaine's eyes. Only a fraction of time had elapsed since her caressing hands were wet with the water of Alan's bath, since she was a mistress, a handmaiden in the unashamed privacy of two. Now she was the sedate dignified mother, charged with unimagined trouble. Yet the same woman, somehow. Even the accident was forgotten. Jack's fearful, defiant face, as he ate, was all chin.

"And without asking your father about it!"

"No use asking the dad when I'd made up my mind."

"Jack! . . . And I hear you flew over. What had that got to do with it all? I suppose it had something to do with it. But I'm all in the dark. You go and do——! Everything coming at once like this!"

"She won't argue," thought Alan. "She's past argument. She's come out on the other side of argument. Simplest."

"I'm awfully sorry, Mum."

"You aren't as sorry as I am," said Elaine,

recovering a little her composure. "Labour! A Frith-Walter! After the way they're always behaving at the works too! Well, I give up trying to understand you, Jack. But I gave up long ago. And this flying again!"

There was a knock at the door. Miss Office entered.

"May I come in?"

Elaine completed her recovery. To Alan, in her sedate dignity she was infinitely pathetic, a tortured courageous child within a mother; for him nothing mattered in the catastrophe save its effect upon that helpless child. His compassion for her pained him acutely and absorbed him. He cared naught for Jack's wicked conscience, or the great social problem, or Pearl's feelings, or his own feelings. He wanted to comfort Elaine, who was perhaps mentally incapable of argument on the high philosophic male plane, but who had the robust sense to see the folly of all argument, and who was the chief and saddest victim. And he could not comfort her.

Miss Office was plainly worried, self-conscious. She shut the door rather solemnly, but held on to the door-knob, fingering it in the manner of an actress who is trying to express feelings which the dramatist has not put into his dialogue. Alan knew the look on her face.

"Well, Miss Office, what's the latest calamity?" he asked, with an attempt at cheerful bluffness.

Miss Office smiled feebly.

"I'm afraid there's been a muddle about your trunk, Mr. Frith-Walter. The number on the trunk doesn't correspond with the number on the luggage-check. It's my fault. I ought to have looked at it at Victoria. I thought I had done. I told them it was your trunk—at least that Cook's man told them for me. I offered to open it for them, because I always carry your second key myself, in case anything should happen. But they wouldn't hear of it. Cook's man says they say you'll have to go down there yourself and sign a paper about it. I said you were ill, and all about the railway accident and so on. But no! It wouldn't do for them. I do think it's a bit cool. I'm awfully sorry. I know it's my fault." She looked at Elaine as the chief possible source of dissatisfaction with her.

Alan was relieved. The trunk at that moment was a trifle in his eyes. Sooner than trouble about the trunk he would be ready to go out into Genoa the next morning, and buy afresh the entire outfit that the trunk contained.

"Now don't think twice about it," he said masterfully. "You get something to eat and go to bed. It's not your fault at all. It's the fault of those tip-cadging fiends at Victoria. Anyhow we'll see to it tomorrow."

"Yes, Mr. Frith-Walter. Just as you think best."

"I'll go down to the station myself in the morning," said Jack in a lordly, casual tone, as one who

would put the fear of God into Italian State Railways. "You haven't given up the check?"

"Oh no!" said Miss Office, quietly triumphant on that point. "I wasn't going to let them have *that!*"

"Good!" said Jack. "How long was the Rome train before it went?"

"Well," Miss Office gave one of her nervous starts, and faltered. "The truth is it hasn't gone. They kept it waiting ever so long, and then they came and told the passengers it couldn't go on tonight, but there'd be another train tomorrow morning. I suppose they meant tomorrow's Rome Express, and they'll add carriages to it. I do think it was a bit cool. Of course all the passengers had to get out and arrange the best they could for themselves."

Alan was watching her. She had the uneasy, guilty air that he himself had when compelled to announce misfortunes of which he was utterly innocent.

"Well I'm damned!" Jack exclaimed, visibly turning pale. He gazed hard at his plate.

As for Alan, he foresaw complications of the most awful nature. He felt that he could stand no more hammering from fate; but that he would have to stand more.

Elaine said calmly and coldly:

"Then Mrs. John has come here?"

"No, madam. She's gone to the Cecil."

"But didn't she know we were all here?"

"I really couldn't say, madam."

"But didn't you tell her?"

"Yes, madam, I did. I offered to help her. But she said she'd be quite all right. Perhaps she thought there wouldn't be room here. She did say she'd stayed at the Cecil before."

Alan was stupefied; Jack also. The cat was out of the bag. The disgrace of the Frith-Walter family was public, Miss Office being the public. Miss Office could be trusted; her loyalty was absolute; the woes of the Frith-Walters were her woes; but she was the public. This horrible contretemps it was, and not the affair of the trunk, that had upset Miss Office and painted guilt on her face.

"Thank you, Miss Office," said Elaine, grandly assuming charge of the situation. "I'm sure you did everything you could. Do go to bed—as my husband says."

Miss Office escaped, like an examinee from the terrors of a *viva voce*. The Frith-Walter family were again alone together.

## CHAPTER XXXII

## THE MOTHER

ELAINE glanced at Alan, who raised his eyebrows and parted his lips, to indicate to her that he knew no more than she knew and that even if he did he refused to accept any responsibility for anything that had happened or might happen. Then Elaine turned to Jack:

"Jack, you must go along to the Cecil at once, and bring your wife here. You can't possibly stay in different hotels like this."

"But Mum, she'll be all fixed up by now. She won't want to be moving again at this time of night."

"Then you must go and stay *there*. I can't understand, if she really had to go on to Viareggio without seeing us, why you didn't stop with her till the train started. Then this couldn't have happened."

"Oh yes it could. Besides, she didn't wish me to stop with her. She said I'd better come to you at once."

"That was very sweet of Pearl," said Elaine coldly. "But your place was with her."

"You don't know Pearl, Mum. I had to leave

her, and what did it matter whether I left her a bit earlier or a bit later?"

"It seems to me," Elaine replied, "it mattered a lot. If you'd stayed with her, I say, this wouldn't have happened."

"I say it would," said Jack curtly.

"Have you and Pearl quarrelled then?" asked Elaine. Her tone was calm; it was stately; but in the sounds of her voice tragedy faintly vibrated. She was the mother; had never been anything else but the mother.

"We haven't quarrelled at all. We've separated." Jack went on eating, grimly. Alan had finished his meal. "You see it's like this. As I've told you, I'm going into Parliament as a Labour member, and Pearl says she can't stick living with a Labour member. And that's that. We've talked it all out. She won't give way. And I can't. Can't be helped." He took a fresh mouthful.

Alan demanded gently:

"But when did you decide to separate? You hadn't decided when last we were discussing it."

"*She* had. Possibly I hadn't."

"But you said you hadn't."

"I did say something like that. But while you were asleep after Turin, we went into the other compartment and settled it finally. As she said, no object in letting the thing drag on. May as well face the facts."

"But my boy, this is terrible. You don't realise how terrible it is," said Elaine.

"Don't I!"

"I simply refuse to believe it. Pearl——"

"Still, there it is." Jack drank some champagne, threw his napkin on the table, and lit a cigarette.

"Do you mean to tell me," said Elaine, now more than a mother, a queen. "Do you mean to tell me that your wife is ready to leave you because—because you don't have the same opinions about politics?"

"I only mean to tell you what she's told me. . . . That's what women are these days," Jack added.

"Breaking up the home."

"There is no home."

"Then there ought to have been. All this living in hotels. . . ."

"I know. I know. Of course there ought to have been a home. Don't I see it! But hotels save so much trouble."

"*Do* they save trouble?" said Elaine effectively.

Too effectively, Alan thought. Her tone was that not merely of a mother to a child, but of a mother to a child who was under no nervous strain, and who was being silly out of simple naughtiness.

Elaine went on:

"May I ask whether you and Pearl had come to this decision before you left England?"

"No. Not exactly."

"Or before the accident happened?"

"Oh no! Didn't you hear what I said to Father?"

"Then you just made the decision casually in the train?"

Elaine's manner, provocative and hostile, still showed no concession. Alan had a desire to instil the wisdom of diplomacy into both of them; but he forbore, lest he might render bad worse. He sat helpless, and watched the breach widen between them. It was indeed deplorable that Elaine should be cross-examining the boy on a point which he had already explained quite clearly in reply to Alan's question. Jack might excusably have charged her with casually not listening.

"Casually, do you say?" Jack burst out. "Casually? Certainly not. Do you seriously suppose that anybody does that sort of thing casually? As for it being in the train—why shouldn't it be in the train?" He stood up, and glared and flared. "A train's just as good as any other place. We knew each other's minds, positively." He came near to shouting. Then he sat down, glancing at his father an appeal, an apology. "Sorry!" He finished on a quiet, subdued, controlled note: "You say I don't realise! I 'realise' better than anybody. I've got the best reason for 'realising'." He resumed smoking gloomily, sulkily.

Elaine said:

"I'm so disappointed in Pearl that I can't say *how* disappointed I am! Why, if your father had turned Bolshevik do you imagine I should have cut loose from him? A wife! Why, even if he had committed murder—surely wives have a duty. Besides, what business is it of Pearl's?"

"Come, Mother. You're going right round

now. First you say you can't understand me, and now it's Pearl you can't understand. First you take her side, and now you're taking my side. Of course it's Pearl's business. *I* can understand her even if you can't. And 'duty'—Pearl would tell you she had a duty to herself first."

Alan was admiring the boy for his imaginative impartiality in judging between himself and Pearl. He had rarely admired him so much. The boy's sense of fairness surprised him, made him think: "I have been underestimating the lad. He has a quality which I didn't suspect." And Alan thought also in his vanity (but was it vanity?): "He's like me in that. He takes after me."

On the other hand, his estimate of Elaine was being diminished by her attitude and behaviour. A minute or two earlier all his sympathy had been for Elaine. He could no longer see clearly in her the pathetic, tortured, helpless child. What he saw was chiefly a very grown-up, unimaginative, somewhat unjust and harsh lady who was submitting her reason to her susceptibilities and indulging in an egotistic sentimentality. He said in her excuse: "She's a mother," but his brain did not find the excuse valid. He was disappointed in her. More serious, she had lowered the plane of the great altercation. Alan had discerned something magnificent and fundamental in the impasse between Jack and Pearl. It was terrible, but it was beautiful; the parties to it had seemed to be without blame, and the tragedy of their indifference to

be redeemed by the fineness of their irreconcilable ideals. Elaine had somehow cheapened the disaster.

But then she rose and went across to Jack and bent over him, and put her fragile white hand on his rough shoulder, and as if this was not intimate enough she lifted her hand and put it on his smooth and glossy head—the boy's hair was seldom in disorder. She had little elegance of costume, but much distinction of figure, with a natural, quite unconscious gift for the statuesque; and, joining herself thus to her son, whose elbows rested on the tablecloth, his hands covering his eyes, she suddenly achieved a sculptor's effect of grouping in the garish banality of the hotel sitting-room which had been lived in by hundreds of unknown people in the past and would be lived in by hundreds of other unknown people in the future.

"Johnnie," she murmured, with moving tenderness; "I do feel for you."

Alan had no belief in the ability of any person, man or woman, to read thoughts. But he knew that she had guessed his verdict upon her, and that this action of her was the swift result of a determination to regain his approval—and he admitted that it was none the worse for that. He admitted further that, after cheapening the disaster, she was refining it by mysteriously eliminating from it all the grossness of politics and reducing it to its elements of pure human sorrow and individual frustration. True, she had left him, Alan, com-

pletely out of the affair. She, not he, was directing it, by right of superior initiative and force. He accepted the rôle of ignored spectator without any sort of resentment.

"My darling," she said. "You must both think of what is going to happen to you—I shall see Pearl myself; she can't refuse to let me talk to her. You would both of you be alone. It would be worse for her than for you because she's got nothing to be interested in, and you have. She'd have nothing at all, and you wouldn't have anything that's worth having. She'd go and live with her mother—all hotels and hotels. She'd be simply splendid as the mistress of a home, but she'll have no one to make a home for. She's a first-rate girl, Pearl is, but she needs to be loved, all the time. She needs someone to live for. We all do. You'll both get more and more miserable. But you'll get used to things, and that will be the worst of all. How'll you feel, making speeches in the House of Commons, when you remember your wife's playing bridge or going to bed with a book in some hotel? And the longer you go on the less you'll be able to alter it. It would be harder every year. Of course you could be divorced, and you'd be free, but what horrible thing will you have to do to get a divorce? I daren't think about it. It would kill me. She ought to be going to have a child, and you ought to be worrying about her in that way. That would be something worth worrying about—when she couldn't walk much, and would

only go out in the dark, and you had to humour her, and send for doctors and nurses . . . instead of this!" She ceased her gentle cooing, and there was silence, until she added in a new, almost dramatic tone: "Me a grandmother! And it was only yesterday that you crawled up the stairs of Abbott's Ferry on your hands and toes."

Alan was ashamed. He was ashamed because he had scarcely given a thought to the result of politics on the domestic future of Jack and Pearl. He had not thought once of the idea of a child, of being himself a grandfather. (A funny, youthful kind of a grandfather, he said to himself.) He admired Elaine beyond words. She had not been clever in the least. She had only said softly what had come into her head, probably without design. She had suggested no solution of the frightful dilemma. But she had drawn two pictures; she had drawn three. He saw her when she was outrageously big with the future fanatical politician. But it was not like yesterday. His throat inconvenienced him.

"Don't!" cried Jack angrily, slipping from under Elaine's hand and standing up tall. "What's the use of rubbing it in? I believe you enjoy rubbing it in. Don't I tell you I know everything you can tell me—and more! And don't I tell you it's no use! I'm going to bed. I shall go back to England tomorrow, and if there was a train I'd go back tonight. For God's sake leave me alone!" He stamped out of the room, and the door banged.

Elaine looked at Alan as if for guidance from the stronger.

"Better let him be," said Alan, in a little more than a whisper.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

## THE BALCONY

"DARLING," said Elaine later, "I'm not looking after you. You must go to bed."

They had scarcely spoken. As to the domestic situation Elaine had uttered no word, save to remark that Jack was being rather noisy in his room —next to the sitting-room.

"So must you go to bed," Alan answered.

"It's you who need to be looked after, not me," said Elaine. "I shall look after you."

She put him to bed, insisted on waiting upon him like a valet. When he protested she replied that he must let her do it, because it soothed her to do it. . . . He was in bed. He was tucked up. All requirements for the night were at his hand. The ceiling light was extinguished. At his request she had, protestingly, closed the window, to keep out noises. She bent over him and kissed him, and still bent over him.

"Well, are you 'soothed' now, my child?" A cheerful, affectionate raillery.

Elaine nodded, trying to smile.

"Then go and get some sleep."

"I don't feel a bit sleepy. When I think what

*might* have happened to you! I know I shall dream about it."

He pulled her head down and kissed her.

"I don't mind you dreaming, as long as you sleep. Get away, my child."

"Do you think you'll sleep?"

"Yes," said Alan, telling a lie in order to continue the process of soothing.

"I shall leave the door open so I can hear you if you call."

"No. If the door's open I shan't sleep a wink. Shut both doors."

She departed, and shut his door gently. The next moment she opened it again.

"Supposing I took some aspirin?"

"Don't do it," said Alan. "You'll sleep without aspirin."

She had a tendency to be addicted to aspirin and other depressents. Alan fought this tendency in her, inveighing sometimes with positive acrimony against the habit of "drugs," which he condemned as foolish and futile and the resort of weaklings. She shut the door, even more gently. Alan was alone. He argued with himself whether he should soothe himself by reading or whether it would be better to take a chance and turn out the bed-lamp at once. He was certainly exhausted, and he was comfortable. . . .

"By Jove!" he murmured, "I must have forgotten to turn out the light." His travelling-watch on the night-table showed that two and a

half hours had passed. He had slept heavily. He felt enfeebled, relaxed; but extremely wakeful; as though he should never sleep again. He ate a biscuit, drank water, thought of all the names of fishes beginning with "m," in both French and English, and went through other performances stated to be soporific. His brain was but stimulated thereby.

He drew the volume of Wordsworth from the night-table and began to read. He counted on Wordsworth to induce in him a tranquillising mood of grand, philosophic, loving comprehension of human nature and its pathetic errors. The result was desolating. It seemed to him that the passages which had inspired him on the previous day and night were exceptional, were even unique, in the book. *The Prelude*, that historic work of poetry, was apparently a sticky mass of bald and tedious prose. With impatience he turned page after page, more and more quickly, and his eye found nothing but such terrible lines as:

> Among that band of officers was one
> Already hinted at——

or:

> Through Paris lay my readiest course, and there
> Sojourning a few days——

The thing was merely unreadable, and Wordsworth a copious bore. Then, contumelious and exasperated, he came across the following:

Then was the truth received into my heart,
That, under heaviest sorrow earth can bring
If from affliction somewhere do not grow
Honour which could not else have been, a faith,
An elevation, and a sanctity,
If new strength be not given, and old restored,
The blame is ours, not Nature's.

"That's not so bad," he thought. "It's a bit preachy and sententious, and it's only second-rate poetry. But it's not so bad."

He read it again:

If from affliction somewhere do not grow
Honour which could not else have been, a faith——

"Something in it," said he. "Preachy or not. Damned fine! It's an idea." And suddenly Wordsworth had inspired him once more, and more fully. "Of course I knew it before, but I didn't know I knew it." He was uplifted. He saw a plain road before him in what had been confusion. He was conscious of strength to mount the road. He was equal to anything. "That's enough for one night!" He turned out the lamp. He was happy within. But he could not sleep. Thirty minutes went by. The blood began to throb in his damaged temple.

"Aspirin. I saw it in the bathroom, didn't I?" The drug habit was a danger; it was foolish and futile—but not to himself. He longed for a drug, and thought of a hundred arguments in favour of a drug. He rose from the bed like a criminal, and without a sound opened the door.

The door opposite, leading to Elaine's room, was ajar, and light showed in the narrow, upright rectangle. Beyond the darkness of the bathroom he could see Elaine sitting and leaning back in an easy-chair in front of the open window, a glowing cigarette in her hand and afterwards in her mouth. She had put on another dressing-gown, thicker and paler and more golden than the first one. Her legs were crossed, and the upper one dangling slowly. A mournful, almost despairing expression in her face. A helpless girl. He gazed at her, not moving, and thought: "This is my chief concern. The others must look after themselves. Anyhow she came out of her supine state tonight. By God she did!"

She turned with a start and saw him, and tightly gripped the side of the chair with hands in the traditional pose of a sphinx.

"Alan! What's the matter?"

"You naughty little thing!" said he lightly, blithely, advancing. "Didn't I order you to shut both doors?" She made a gesture of anxiety, and he reassured her: "I'm all right. I slept like a log for I don't know how long, and then I woke up and I couldn't go to sleep again. I *did* think I could wander around without disturbing you. I knew I shouldn't get to sleep unless I did wander. So up I jumped."

His tone was meant to ease her, and it succeeded. As he approached she raised her glance. He stood close to her, and with a sudden movement snatched

the cigarette from her mouth and took a puff. To him there was always something comic in Elaine's smoking. The way she tapped the cigarette on a table before lighting it, to force the tobacco down from the top end was very funny: a ritualistic motion which must on no account be omitted. And the instant she had drawn in smoke she would whip the cigarette from her mouth as though it were dangerous. She did not smoke from pleasure, but from a desire to show herself that she was broad-minded. He restored the cigarette to her lips and it hung there suspended. Yes, his playfulness had reassured her. Neither of them spoke. Alan could think of nothing wise enough to say. He went to the window and stepped out on the balcony.

She vanished quickly through the bathroom and returned with his dressing-gown, which she held beseechingly for him to put on. He put it on. He leaned on the rail of the balcony. She leaned close to him on one arm, and passed the other through his, and he squeezed it tight. The vast port lay far beneath them under a cloudy night sky. A warm air. The entrance-lights of the port flashing in colour. The lofty lighthouse to the right sweeping its powerful beam. Nearer, the dim, huge forms of serried steamers, some of them —liners—blazing with electricity. Still nearer, the quays, alive with carts and horses and motor-lorries in movement, and moving trams skirting the quays, and trains ceaselessly shunting and

snorting in the deep ravine of the railway track. A racket of various sounds. The port never slept, night or day. There was a mysterious quality, sinister and very sad, in its terrible activity. And yet it was exalting too with its everlasting, untiring human endeavour. So it had gone on and so it would go on, dwarfing all individual lives. But man had made it.

Alan felt the warmth of his wife's slim arm. The girl's arm, the arm of the girl who wanted to be a grandmother, the majestic arm of the queen! His heart as well as his body was very near her. The affection and use of a quarter of a century of placid companionship joined them together.

"Now you must go back to bed," he said.

She let fall the burning cigarette-end, which sank in spiral curves till it disappeared in shrubs on the level of the piazza.

"Alan!" she murmured. "I couldn't bear a divorce."

"Oh!" said he. "They don't think anything of a divorce these days." He recalled Pearl's remark, apropos of her wedding ring. "Nobody does."

"*I* do."

"My girl," he said, leading her masterfully into the bedroom. "It will all come out right. You'll see." He kissed his confidence into her; he inspired her by virtue of the inspiration which he had received from Wordsworth. His mood was entirely due to Wordsworth. Miracle! He

recalled that he had most deplorably and astoundingly lost his temper in the train. But he felt no shame, only philosophic amusement.

"You *have* done me good!" Elaine said admiringly, trustfully.

"Now off with that padded thing and into bed. You'll sleep now. So shall I."

She seized him and kissed him solemnly; her ardour was religious.

"Well," thought Alan. "The boy can have politics."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

## YOUNG LOVE

BEING persons of regular morning habits, not to be disturbed by irregular nights, Alan and Elaine came together into the sitting-room the next day, just as if nothing unusual had happened. Elaine, dressed easily first, had helped Alan to dress—not because he needed help, but because she wanted to help him. She had ordered their breakfast for ten o'clock punctually, and at ten o'clock punctually they appeared, though the breakfast did not. They saw Jack leaning over the balustrade of the balcony, just as they themselves had been leaning a few hours earlier. The bustle and noise of the port was still enormously proceeding, careless of the infinitesimal destinies of important human beings above. Elaine's face instantly changed to an expression of intense nervous anxiety. She glanced at Alan, who cheerfully raised his eyebrows and called out with heartiness:

"Morning, Jack."

Jack turned.

"Morning, parents," he responded, imitating the demeanour of his father, and slipped into the room

and kissed his mother. "For an invalid, Dad, you look pretty fit. How's the gash?" He was clothed, of course, with plenary correctness as a tourist who knew all the sartorial rules of travel and respected them. A distinguished object, bearing no sort of resemblance to the popular conception of a Labour M.P.

"You've been to the barber's already," Alan chaffed him, after replying about his own state of health.

"I have. Makes you feel hungry," Jack retorted, in a similar tone.

Elaine, silent, rang the bell. The breakfast entered, on wheels.

"I'm glad you've had it laid for three," said Jack.

"But naturally I've had it laid for three," said Elaine gravely. "I certainly expected you to have breakfast with us. I should have been very disappointed if you hadn't."

"Maternal instinct for keeping the family united in grievous circumstances," thought Alan, who was brightly sardonic.

"Well," he began, when the waiter had gone and Elaine had poured out tea, "what's the news?"

"Well," Jack answered. "I've written a letter to Pearl and sent it to the Cecil." He was now noticeably self-conscious.

"We're in the middle of it all again," Alan reflected; he said nothing.

"Yes," said Jack. "I thought it all over in the night. I can see there's a lot in what you all say,

and I've told her I shall withdraw my name as a candidate."

"Then you won't stand for Parliament?" Elaine exclaimed, low, half-incredulous.

"That's it," said Jack.

"You've really decided?" Elaine's face was lightening.

"That's it. I can see it wouldn't do. I don't particularly want to argue about it. I'll only say I think I may be more use outside the House than in it. My being in the House might prejudice the Party."

"My dear boy, what a relief!" cried Elaine, ecstatic, with tears in her eyes. "It all came so suddenly—last—night—I couldn't believe it. And now it's ended suddenly, and I'm so glad I can't tell you. Your father said it would all come right. But Jack, these things are terribly wearing for your mother, and your father too." She rose slowly, and with much dignity kissed Jack, who was restive under the caress. Then she wiped her eyes. "You'll go and fetch Pearl here."

"Yes," Jack agreed. "Only we don't know yet what time her train goes."

"You'll go with her to Viareggio?"

"I certainly shall," said Jack.

Alan stared boldly at the boy, who avoided his gaze.

"Well," said Alan. "All I'll say is I'm glad. We'll leave it at that."

And he was glad, but he was also not glad.

And he was far more not glad than glad. The reputation and the unity of the family were saved. He would be spared strange remarks from his fellow-directors, and strange glances from the employees. Separation and divorce were no longer a menace. Pearl was saved from the fate of the lone woman, and Jack from the fate of the lone man. But what about political ideals and aims? What about the boy's zeal for what he deemed to be the welfare of the country? What about the under-dog? Abandoned, all abandoned in favour of passion for a woman! Alan knew that any reasons which Jack might advance for his change of front would be merely a cover for the real reason —passion. Men who were not passionately in love did not fly hundreds of miles in winter to overtake their idol. Passion in itself was fine; but in Jack's case it had defeated his conscience. What must his passion be to have got the better of that obstinate chin! The boy was a miserable slave. It was not his fault, nor Pearl's. It was his misfortune. He was a victim. The result was dire, in the profoundest sense. Alan was amazed and depressed by Elaine's apparent total failure to perceive the secret tragedy underlying her son's return to sanity. Better madness and disaster than this sanity based on emotion. He was very sad, sadder than he had ever been on the day previous. He felt that he was sad for the rest of his life. And there was Elaine exultant, blind, without vision. Nevertheless he gave himself strength

to meet the fresh, astounding development of calamity. "If new strength is not found," he said to himself firmly, "the blame is ours, not Nature's."

But he had no notion of what he ought to do. Dangerous to upbraid the boy, to attempt to undermine the boy's confidence in himself! The boy had taken a heroic decision; or, otherwise expressed, the boy had yielded to cowardice. But in either case the boy must be supported. So Alan maintained cheerfulness, and made one or two subtle jokes of which neither the boy nor his mother perceived the point.

"Yes, you can clear away," said Elaine to the waiter who entered.

But the waiter said:

"A lady, madam."

Pearl came in. She was wearing a frock, coat and hat, in shades of blue, to which Alan was a total stranger, and he wondered how she had contrived, in the maze of Italian red-tape, to get hold of trunks registered for Viareggio, and how, having obtained them, she had had the energy to open them if she meant to continue the journey by the noon train. She showed the same plenary correctness as Jack. A fine-looking couple!

Pearl, despite efforts to hide the fact, was nervous, and instantly the other three grew very nervous, Elaine and Jack more than Alan, who was cultivating the devil-may-care attitude.

"Good morning, everybody."

Jack stood up and said nothing. Elaine stood up.

"My *dear*!" Elaine murmured.

The two women kissed—the kiss of women who know what is expected from them. Pearl had perceived in the tenth of a second that her mother-in-law was faintly hostile. Alan perceived this too, but he could not understand why Elaine should feel resentment against the girl whose firmness had saved the family from the humiliation of possessing a Labour M.P. Simultaneously he understood the mystery perfectly well.

"In my quality of invalid," said he, "I'm not supposed to rise."

Pearl put her hands on his shoulders, looked at him affectionately, and refrained from kissing him. No doubt the presence of the waiter had checked her; but Alan was disappointed. Still, he said to himself for solace, "She kissed my hand in the train, anyhow." And never would he forget it.

"You're absurdly beautiful this morning," he said, taking her hand after he had replied to a question about his condition.

"Am I?"

Constraint again: Alan had failed to dissipate it.

The waiter was unbelievably slow.

"By the way," said Alan. "Where's Miss Office? I expected to see her earlier than this."

"She was in here before you came in," said Jack. "I told her to go out for a walk."

"But my trunk? I must have my trunk."

"My dear father," said Jack, with benevolent condescension. "Don't worry about your trunk.

I said I should see to it and I have done. It's in the corridor."

Alan waved a hand.

The waiter, having replaced a bowl of flowers on the table, finally departed. All were now sitting. Renewed constraint.

"Dearest Pearl," Elaine began sweetly, "your father-in-law and I are very glad indeed at what's happened. We're sure Jack's right to change his mind."

"Change his mind?" Pearl repeated, as it were absently.

"Haven't you had my note, Pearl?" Jack burst out—his first words.

"Yes," said Pearl. "I've had it, thanks."

Her nervousness had increased. In the train Alan had thought her the most self-possessed woman in the whole world, with a mature equanimity impossible to disturb in almost any circumstances. But now, especially in comparison with the dignified and older Elaine, she seemed very young, rather wistful, rather touching, rather appealing in her surprising embarrassment. She had won the great conjugal battle, but she had no air of a victrix.

"I'm sorry you're glad," she faltered, to Elaine. Then she got up and went across to Jack. "Do you think, my poor boy, that I'm going to let anyone say that you gave up your political career for a woman? Do you think it for a single moment? Because if you do you're wrong. I should be too

ashamed. I couldn't bear it. You're a horrid nuisance with your politics, and you'll upset your mother dreadfully; but you've just got to go on with them. I forgive you that letter. What am I saying? As if *I* had anything to forgive! Your letter was—well, never mind what it was. All I say is you aren't going to give up any career for me. And I shan't leave you. If you must ruin your native country, I'll stand in with you. What does it matter? All politics are silly. No, they aren't. Well, I don't know what I mean." She turned to Elaine. "I suppose I've done for myself with you. I can't help it; and so there we are! Jack, I didn't like you being so weak, but if you hadn't been—I don't know where we should have been. No, I really don't! With my obstinacy. Not that I *really* think you were weak. You were clever. Nobody else could have been so clever. Jack——" Her clear tones had thickened. She began to cry and fell on to him, somehow, in a lump, her elegance all gone.

"My dear," said Elaine plaintively to Alan, with equivocation and an incomparable presence of mind, "I *do* think you ought to let me dress your forehead now. I shan't ask you again."

They left the room for Elaine's bedroom; Alan shut the door; they breathed out relief. Alan had the feeling of having escaped from something too formidably impressive, and he saw that Elaine was similarly moved.

"I simply don't know where I am!" said Elaine

in a low, uncertain tone. Then louder: "Everything was all right, and now she's gone and spoilt it all when she needn't have done." She added, more softly, but still somewhat critically: "It's to her credit that she can cry. I never thought she could."

"She's a great girl," said Alan, secretly alarmed to discover that he could scarcely control his voice.

There they stood, the older ones, shaken by the spectacle of a youthful, impassioned emotion which they knew themselves incapable of emulating, and which they could emulate less and less as the years passed over them.

"But my dear," said Elaine, "this is terrible."

"You know it isn't."

"He'll be Labour after all."

"And what if he is?"

"They'll never agree."

Alan nodded a contradiction.

"She'll play it," he murmured. "You'll see."

"Play what?"

"The game."

Elaine reflected aloud:

"I should just think she *did* give way to him! Him flying after her!"

"She was more cross about that than anything."

"My poor darling, do you really think so?" said Elaine superiorly, as to a simpleton.

"Well, if she was acting she ought to be on the stage," said Alan stoutly.

He admitted, however, to himself that the flight

must have had a tremendous effect on her, an effect against which she had fought savagely. Then the stress of the railway accident had intensified every sensation, producing violent extremes. But for the accident Pearl might never have comprehended her own heart until pride had carried her too far for comprehension to be of any avail.

"I'm sure Jack's been splendid," said Elaine.

"Yes, Jack's all right. And it's something to be in love as that boy is."

"They'll have frightful scenes, you know."

"I know. Let 'em. They're the goods. Pearl is, and Jack is."

"And do you see her as a socialist, darling?" Elaine was never nearer the ironic.

"If I like I'll see her as a Bolshevik," said Alan defiantly. "I don't care." And he did not care.

"You're happy."

"So are you, you two-faced little thing." In his beatific exuberance he kissed Elaine violently.

A door banged. Alan cautiously opened the door into the sitting-room, and saw Jack opening the door opposite, which led from his bedroom, a heavy bag in his hand.

"Jack," called Pearl unseen. "I won't let that bag go like that. It's bound to burst open." She appeared, with Jack's overcoat on her arm. "Give it me." Her tone was sharp, imperative. "Oh!" she exclaimed, seeing Alan. Jack, intimidated, dropped the bag, which Pearl knelt down to rearrange.

Elaine entered.

"You aren't going?"

"Good-bye! Good-bye! Just time to get to the Cecil and catch the train. Good-bye!"

Kisses. Elaine's long embrace of Pearl contradicted all the criticism which she had been uttering to Alan.

"And what will Mrs. Meadowes say to all this Red politics?" Alan demanded teasingly.

"Mrs. Meadowes," Pearl answered, "won't hear a word about it till we're back in England."

They were gone, arguing and laughing, and bickering. They seemed to pass from mood to mood with the levity of children. . . . Their way of making love, no doubt.

"Yes," thought Alan, while Elaine sat meditative and a little tearful in her dignity. "There'll be storms. Typhoons. But she'll stick to it. New strength required daily. I'm dashed if I don't read everything Wordsworth ever wrote. Because never again shall I be without a care."

THE END

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London
F200.1128